NIGHTBEAT

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Cover graphics ..... Frank V. Liltz
Table of contents ..... Page 1
CREATURES OF THE NIGHT, a Beauty and the Beast universe story by Lorraine Goodison ..... Page 2
SURVIVOR, poetics of Batman by Teri Sarick ..... Page 5
DARK LOVER, vampire poetics by Janet P. Reedman ..... Page 6
GONE TOO FAR, vampire poetics by Janet P. Reedman ..... Page 7
BUELLER'S BRIGADE, Southern gothic fiction by Tracy Jean Revels ..... Page 8
THE BURIAL, dark poetics by Teresa Sarick ..... Page 13
THE CITY OF ENDLESS SORROW, fiction in the Twilight Zone tradition by Janet P. Reedman ... Page 14
OZZ, dark poetics by Teresa Sarick ..... Page 17
A CHANCE ENCOUNTER IN HADDONFIELD, fiction based on the Hallowe'en mythos by Debbie Coyne ..... Page 18
RHYME, dark poetics by Teresa Sarick ... Page 21
SO LONG AS THERE IS LOVE, fiction based on the Midnight Caller universe, Kelly Hill.. Page 22
LIFELINE--OCTOBER 17, 1989, poetry based upon the Midnight Caller universe, Kelly Hill.. Page 25
A FIEND IN NEED, fiction based on the Nick Knight universe by Susan M. Murrie ..... Page 26
NICK'S LAMENT, poetry based on the Nick Knight universe by Barbara A. Staton ..... Page 33
PEACE OFFICER, fiction based on In The Heat of the Night by Charlotte L. Desilets ..... Page 34
AD INFINITUM, vampire fiction by Denysė M. Bridger ..... Page 50
UNTITLED, dark poetics by Teresa Sarick ..... Page 52

For Karen, with love
Thank you for the preparation

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Creatures of the Night

by Lorraine Goodison

I knew he was there before I saw him--heard his soft-weighted tread, smelled the curious mixture of scents I could not place. I should have moved, shifted at least into the shadows, but I was too weary to fight the sluggishness of my body. I waited.

He came down the alley. Tall, graceful, wrapped in a swirl of cloth and leather. A creature of the night, just as I. With that realization I should have let him be, but...

My soul cried in despair even as the surge of desperation pushed my limbs into a soundless rush. Looking back, I was stupid to go for someone so much stronger, but weakness and hunger make fools of us all.

I landed on his back, digging past the clothing to the warm flesh below. He roared--roared! My ears rang with the sound, but I hung on, a limpet on a moving rock of muscular strength.

That was when I discovered, to my cost, that he, too, possessed claws. They tore into me, shredding my already worn clothes. I felt my own blood spring to their touch and I would have cried out if I could have found voice.

He shrugged me off after a brief struggle of unequal proportions. I was flung against a wall where I crumpled, too far gone to care that he stood over me, gleaming fangs bared in threat. Perhaps some part of me hoped he could cancel the agony of my living, for I lay supine, waiting.

In the moment which passed between the visible draining of his anger and the re-emergence of human intelligence, I think I hated him.

"What are you?"

I smiled thinly, thinking of his sharp fangs. "Your kin."

"I think not." His voice, rough and soft as velvet brushed against the pile, held puzzlement and a little disbelief. His eyes glinted in the casting of shadows as he knelt in a rustle of cloth.

Staring at him, my night sight revealed what was hidden to normal eyes. My gaze travelled his face, noting the flattened muzzle and split upper lip, the fine facial hair and deep-set crystal blue eyes. Those eyes were searching and open, holding an honesty I could not face. I glanced away, not bothering to hide my bitterness. "Perhaps you are right."

He did not move, continuing to watch me with an intentness I could not bear. It had been so long since anyone looked at me with something more than terrified realization. I kept my face averted until he shifted his position to survey me from a less threatening distance.

We remained that way for lengthening minutes, caught in amber. The night sounds dimmed to my senses until all I knew was my ragged gasps and his deep, even breathing. The nearness of him shrieked in my veins, pounded in my head with every beat of his heart.

"Are you ill?"

Harsh laughter grated from my throat. "I am sick, if that's what you mean. SIck of life, sick of existence..." I stirred, reaching for him with a

dizzying fear which agonizingly swept me. "This is life, isn't it? We live?"

The huge head nodded, his heavy, tawny mane draping over face and shoulders. A lion, I thought. I'm talking to a lion...

"I wish I were dead," I whispered, wondering not for the first time, whether I was and simply did not realize it.

"Why?"

His question surprised me. Was it not self-evident? Did I have to explain to such as he? "To live in hell is no life at all."

"And is your life so terrible?"

I could not deal with the unreal dialogue any longer. Cursing under my breath, I pushed against the wall at my back, the rough brick grating against my open palm. My legs shook, but I stood and managed to ignore his offer of support. With what I hoped was scorn on my face, I said, "If you have to ask that, you know nothing."

He stood in one fluid motion, towering over me. "I did not mean to offend."

The laughter returned, threatening hysteria. "None taken." It seemed absurd, speaking this way, me who had not spoken to another for countless years. The mores of social politeness held their sway even so.

His hand, that huge, gentle paw, was still extended in concern. "You are unwell. Have you somewhere to go?"

"The shadows." Good God, was that self-pity rising up? I had thought myself beyond that.

Judging myself recovered enough to leave the wall's security, I stepped away. My knee and buckled and he caught me, strong and close, and oh, the sweet despairing urge! Could he not feel the trembling of my limbs, fight the instinct which, weak as I was, ordered me to take his life?

He ignored my ineffectual struggle, persisting with his infuriating compassion. I, in my turn, tried to ignore his support by pulling away from his touch.

"Let me be!" Was that my voice, thready and cracked?

He backed off a pace, but he was still maddeningly near and I knew I could not control it much longer.

"You need nourishment."

An apt choice of word. The wind whistled along the alley, making kites of our clothing. I thought about cold, and remembered what it felt like. Lost in that delirious memory, I remembered also that I had not replied. It seemed important that I should, but only bitter bile found voice. "Had you been weaker, I would have gotten all I needed."

I could feel that gaze burning into me. RIght then, I did not care what he thought or felt, the need was too great. In any case, why concern myself over another victim of God's sense of humor?

I began to walk, weaving an unsteady path along a garbage-strewn passage. Perhaps I would find a cat, dog, or some vagrant too drunk to notice. I knew the penalty of not finding food. Twice I had endured the ignominy of being regarded as a corpse because I delayed too long. I did care to undergo the experience a third time.

The lion's hand, heavy and rich with life, rested on my shoulder to halt my shambling progress. His deep tones said, "I can help you."

I glanced at him, disbelieving. "You know what you offer?"

He nodded, solemn.

"I..." My voice drained away with the rest of my resolve. His scent was strong, filling my brain with an insatiable appetite. I licked my lips. Dare I... I stared in rapt fascination at his long neck, feeling the rush of expectation. My eyes travelled to meet his. "Please..."

He bared his wrist, scarcely betraying the tremble of fear which must be there. No one, not even him, would react otherwise to my eager lurch forward.

In the realm of fiction, the jugular vein is always the favorite. True, it is the best and easiest, providing a more immediate satisfaction, but any major vein will do.

I drank, feeling the impact of his richly oxygenated blood surge new strength into me. It was all I could do to stop myself drinking until I need never drink again, but that thirst would never be quenched and I knew the danger of releasing my last control over my inhuman affliction.

My benefactor reeled away as I released his wrist and this time it was I who supported him. I lowered him to the ground, standing by as he folded his legs into a comfortable position. He tugged his sleeve over the puncture wounds.

"They'll heal quickly," I murmured, feeling the heady impact of his blood on my system.

He nodded once and those deep-set eyes gazed up at me with more compassion than I deserved. "What made you this way?" he asked, as if my condition was no more unusual than a disease or a sly trick of fate.

Following his example, I perched myself on a pile of boxes and folded my arms. A wry smile caught my mouth as I said, "I met a vampire."

"How long ago?"

"How long...? Casting my gaze to the darkened skies, I considered the question and all its ramifications. What pain did I dance with by recalling the past? "I don't remember," I lied. "My former life died and all the nights and days are the same now."

He did not choose to pursue the matter and I gratefully pushed the subject back to him. "And you? What's your story?"

Something indefinable crossed his face. "I was born...I survived."

Perhaps that was enough. "You're luckier than I. At least you've always known your fate. You have nothing to regret."

He looked as if he would like to question that observation, but kept his peace, choosing instead to deflect the conversation, such as it was, back to me. "Where do you go during the day."

"I have a hiding place, just as you do." I rose, basking in the strength he had willingly given me. "And now I must go. I had to travel a long way tonight to find...suitable food."

He had regained the vitality lost when I took his blood, but he accepted my outstretched hand to aid his rising.

We stared at each other, both alienated, both creatures of the night. I felt I should say something, but all that emerged was, "Thank you."

He inclined his head slightly and reached back to pull his hood over his head. "Farewell."

"I doubt either of us can hope that."

Turning, I pulled my worn coat tighter round my shoulders, but there

was something I needed to say, even yet. I looked back at his retreating figure, raised my voice to ask, "Why did you let me feed?"

His back was toward me, but he swiveled, his eyes dark pools of shadow. "Because you tried to deny your hunger. You tried to walk away from me."

I think I gave him a wan smile. "I have to at least pretend to still be human, don't I?"

His solemn gaze fixed me. "You are more human than many I have met."

"Once, maybe..." I watched him, the first person to have spoken to me in years; the first to listen and know. "Tell me your name."

"Vincent."

Standing there, I imagined how I looked, pale and drawn, a waif of dark intent. I raised my chin, drawing on a last reserve of pride. "My name is Anna-Marie."

The silence between us was thick with our encounter and I think we stood there for some minutes before I dropped my gaze and walked away from the first and last genuine compassion of my nightmare existence. In years to come, I would take this encounter from its secret home and hold it, like gleaming candle, to warm my ragged soul.

Survivor

The Dark Knight carries
no sword
On his quest through the
haunted city,
No one dares dispute
his words
When he says:
I own the night

Behind his shield of vengeance
In armor black and fierce
Stands a man, like any other.
But is he?

Who among us would take the challenge?
To refuse passive acceptance
And take on the darkest evil
That covers this city with fear.

His cape unfolds like batwings
As he waits for the sky-bright signal
That tells him twilight has fallen
And he is called, on his sad crusade.

Teri Sarick

Dark Lover

Castle turrets prod
a glowering sky
ready to burst its wastes
on an unhappy earth.
Pale silver at wrists
and ear
he sits before a mirror
showing no reflection,
combing long hair
raven's wing green.
Whiteness of cheeks
denotes purity--or death,
redness of lips life--
or its sweet bloody wine.

A languid dark gaze
shows no emotion at the sight
of the virgin sprawled
on satin sheets,
the red mark of his sick love
glowing on her throat,
and only the faded moonlight
shining
in vacant eyes.

Janet P. Reedman

Gone Too Far

He drained her to the last,
deep from the jugular.
Color faded from cheeks
and a warm white body became
pale alabaster,
wreathed only in rings of
crimson hair.
Lips blue with cyanosis
she slumped into crypts lined
with purple satin
while he wailed his agonies
to the unfeeling dark.

Waiting for resurrection
within his ancient curse
white flesh peeled,
stomach boated with gas.
Crimson hair became grey dust
on which a desiccated creature
lay with open screaming mouth.
He had gone too far, too soon,
her spirit fleeing his confines
would never join the Undead.

Tearless eyes contracted
with undying pain
as he drove the wooden stake
through his own heart.

Janet P. Reedman

Bueller's Brigade

by Tracy Jean Revels

The beauty of a blood-red Southern sunset was lost on Thom Elderbridge as he kicked his flat tire and cursed. Neither action improved the situation.

Murphy's Law, Thom decided as he backed away and stared at his Corvette with loathing. Just his luck to blow a tire out in the middle of nowhere, then discover that the spare was also flat. Now there was nothing to do but walk several miles into Bellville, try to find an open station, and pay some hayseed grease monkey to deal with it. Sweating in his new Armani suit, Thom trudged down the road, muttering a string of obscenities and wondering if there was any chance he'd make his morning meeting in Atlanta.

Halfway into town, a battered Ford pulled off the road, and a sunburned face peered out at him. The blue eyes were friendly to match the smile, but Thom's nose twitched at the distinctive odor of manure.

"Reckon that's your Cor-vette back there," the man said, scratching under his 'Ray's Feed and Fertilizer' cap.

Thom forced a smile. "I 'reckon' it is."

His sarcasm was lost on the old man. "Can I give you a ride into town?"

Thom scanned the interior of the truck. Finding nothing unbearably repulsive within, he nodded his assent and opened the door, being careful where he sat.

"Name's Joe, Joe Bueller," the driver said, offering a hand of cracked leather. "Don't recall seeing you around."

Thom endured the sinewy handshake. "I try to avoid this godforsaken part of the world, but the firm insisted I check in with the regional office. I have a very important conference in Atlanta tomorrow morning," he added, hoping to make the old man drive faster. Instead, the driver's speed resembled his words; a slow, thoughtful drawl.

"Well, there ain't no way to get there 'cept through here...unless you take old Highway 14, and cross the Taylor bridge, which ain't in half the time."

Oh, spare me the local geography, Thom thought, thankful when the city limits sign came into sight. Bellville was no more than the dot the map had promised, a small cluster of filling stations, a hardware and feed store, a diner with greasy windows, and a stiff-necked church, all looking slightly sick in the dingy yellow streetlights. The truck jarred his spine as it bounced over the railroad tracks that divided the tiny settlement.

"What station can I take you to?"

Thom flicked a pale hand. "Anywhere that I can buy a tire and have someone put it on for me."

Bueller's scratching resumed. "That'd be Phil's place, I suppose, the Amoco. Just want me to drop you there?"

"Yes, that will be sufficient." Thom checked the time on his Rolex, sighing in distress. If Phil was as slow as this geezer, it'd be daybreak before

he got to Atlanta. The Ford groaned like an arthritic old man, wearily grinding to a halt beside the discolored pumps. Thom slid out and crossed to the driver's side.

"Well, Mr. Bueller, thank you, very much. If I might offer you something for your trouble?"

"Hell no, boy! You city folks is all the same, thinkin' you have to pay somebody for bein' friendly." His eyes twinkled with delight at refusing the bill that came so easily from Thom's eelskin wallet. "But I tell you what--if you have to wait around, which you probably will cause Phil ain't none too fast, stop in at Angie's Cross and you can buy me a cup of coffee."

Thom nodded diplomatically and the old Ford limped off in a cloud of exhaust. Shaking his head, Thom went in search of the legendary loafer Phil.

* * * * *

It was called Angie's Crossroads Cafe, but its nickname was far more appropriate. The only thing that distinguished it from other Southern diners was its religious motif. There were cracked plastic pictures of Old Testament scenes on the walls, along with dusty prayer samplers. Even the cheap paper placemats demanded to know if you were saved. Thom purposely avoided the question and moved to the booth in the corner.

"Mr. Bueller," he said in the cool voice he reserved for less educated clients, "I believe I owe you a cup of coffee."

Checkered scalps of pink and gray turned, eyes sunk in seas of wrinkles regarded him curiously. Bueller, trapped beside a heavyset man in overalls, laughed and raised his empty mug.

"Thought they'd give you the runaround over there. Well, pull up a chair and wait it out, Mr.--"

"Elderbridge," he supplied, reluctantly moving a chair to the end of the wobbly table. He hadn't planned on entertaining the entire yokel population, but Bueller was already rattling off introductions.

"Boys, this here's the fellow I was tellin' you about. Mr. Elderbridge, this is Roy Cowart, John Hicks, Little Bob Williams, and Josh Cody."

"Pleased to meet you," Thom lied, thankful for the tapping approach of the waitress. He turned, and his speech froze in his throat.

She was both old and young, hideously scarred beyond her years. Gray hair drifted from childish pink barrettes, and a Mickey Mouse watch hung loose on a skeletal wrist. Her face was stiffened in an expression of terror, as if she had suffered a stroke upon awakening from a nightmare.

"Can I help you, sir?"

Thom coughed, stammering out an answer. "Just coffee, please. And a refill for Mr. Bueller." Mindless of his own look of horror, he watched as she moved to the counter, lifted the coffeepot, and returned to fill their cups. As she leaned over to pour, a large silver cross slipped free from the neckline of her uniform. She replaced it with a small sigh, holding it against her as if it provided some needed warmth. When she returned to the counter, Thom shook loose of the spell.

"That's just Angie," the huge man identified as Little Bob rumbled. "Don't let her bother you none. She's been like that for five or six years now."

"What is it?" Thom asked in spite of himself. "Some form of disease?"

"Nah, she just run into Bueller's Brigade," Roy answered, spearing a french fry on his neighbor's plate.

Thom saw Bueller shake his head and frown. "What do you mean?" Thom asked.

"You tellin' me you never heard of Bueller's Brigade?" John asked, looking at Thom as if he'd just announced ignorance of George Washington and the cherry tree.

"Now don't start with that," Bueller snapped. "You'll be spinning yarns till Doomsday."

"Don't listen to him," John insisted, leaning closer as if imparting a dark secret. "He's just ashamed cause his grandpappy's ole Bueller himself, blood-drinkin' Bueller!"

Roy's weasel-thin face lit with excitement as he picked up the story. "You see, back durin' the War Between The States, this county had a group of thirteen men led by Colonel Jesse Bueller. 'Course, that warn't no brigade by a long shot, but they called themselves that anyway." He paused long enough to drain his RC Cola. "These fellows was about half-gator, half-bobcat, and they say they could raise hell up and down the lines all night, then fight all day without breakin'. Folks claim the reason they was so damn mean was they had a deal with the Devil. They wanted to live forever so they could kill Yankees till Judgement Day!" This statement brought a round of chuckles from everyone except Joe and Thom. As a fifth generation New Yorker, Thom opted for glaring over the rim of his coffee cup.

"'Cordin' to the story," Little Bob intoned from the depths of his barrel chest, "they caught a Yankee and cut him up there in camp, then drank to the Devil with his blood while he was still squealin'. After that, they figured they didn't have nothin' to worry about...till Colonel Bueller caught a cannon ball in his belly at Antiem Creek."

Thom smiled. "So much for immortality."

"They brung him back here and buried him up on Bueller's Hundred, cause wouldn't no church have him. Bueller family owned that place till the Carpetbaggers come, but that's another story. Anyways, the two Crawford boys got killed at Gettysburg, Willie Joe McHenry got knifed in a brawl, couple of fellows from the south end of the county took the typhoid in camp, and Louis Tyler got blown up at Petersburg. The rest just died, I reckon." Little Bob scratched his head, counted again on his fingers, then nodded. "They's all out there, buried in a circle like they was still at a campfire."

Thom leaned back in his chair, sipping on his coffee. "Gentlemen, this is all very interesting, but what does it have to do with the unfortunate Angie?"

"I was gettin' to that!" Little Bob said, grunting in annoyance at being interrupted. "You see this Danford boy--what was his name? Richard? Anyways, he come down here from Chicago gonna teach school over in Macon. Well, he and Angie took up right regular, and one night they went over to Bueller's Hundred to do a little courtin'."

"Courtin'?" Thom asked with an overly polite smile.

Little Bob flushed. "You know what I mean. This Danford boy, he got out the car for a minute and that's when Bueller's Brigade come out of the earth and pulled him in. Poor Angie got a good look, and she ain't been right since."

Thom frowned around the rim of his mug. "What do you mean by pulled him in?"

"Ate him," John elaborated, "or just chewed him up good fashioned. Kinda hard to tell from what was left."

Thom pushed his cup away, suddenly without thirst. This was certainly not the type of local color he'd expected. "Was the killer ever apprehended?"

"Hell, boy!" Roy suddenly thundered, pointing a gnarled finger in the direction of the window, "How do you plan on arrestin' the dead? Everybody knows who killed him, but if he hadn't been such a damned fool and gone up there, he wouldn't have gotten himself killed in the first place."

"So it was the boy's fault?" Thom said coolly. The old men nodded in unison.

"Everybody in these parts knows that Bueller's Brigade don't want nothin' but Yankee blood," the previously silent Josh intoned. "You Yankees leave them alone, they won't bother you."

Slowly, with ingratiating softness, Thom began to laugh. "Mr. Bueller, you've been strangely quiet. Don't you have anything to say in your grandfather's defense?"

"No," Bueller replied, his voice firmly controlled. "My grandfather was a very evil man, and so were the ones who fought with him in that 'brigade'. You should understand somethin', Mr. Elderbridge...most people in the South didn't really hate the people in the North, not the way that my grandfather and his men did. There was very few Southerners what didn't have kinfolk over the line, or did business with the Yankees on a handshake basis. The kind of hate that the brigade had, well, that was different. That's the kind of hate that makes the fires of Hell seem cold. It wouldn't have mattered about the war, or the Yankees...he'd have gone to the Devil anyways."

"So you believe these tales?" Thom asked.

Bueller's eyes seemed to water. "I believe that hate doesn't die, Mr. Elderbridge. You can't bury it in a grave. It'll come out and eat up your soul."

Despite himself, Thom shivered. A sudden noise made him knock over his mug with a brittle clatter. He turned to find a greasy-faced boy leaning inside the diner's glass door.

"Mr. Elbright? You car's done."

He sighed in honest relief, placing money on the table. "Well, gentlemen, it's been most...<u>enlightening</u> talking to you."

"If you don't believe us," Roy said, staring down at his sweating soda bottle, "you could always stop at the Hundred, take a look around. It's right off the road, past the First Baptist Church."

"Thanks. I might do that." He exited with a quick step, looking at his watch and muttering about the lateness of the hour.

Inside the diner, Bueller scowled at his companions. "What'd you want to go and drag that up for?"

Little Bob shrugged. "What's it that Black boy says on TV? Cause he's got an attitude."

* * * * *

Thom checked his map, then decided to follow the old road out of town, trusting that it would eventually connect with the highway. His headlights speared the night, picking out distinctive Southern landmarks; red eyes on coons, broken fences, the neon cross on a clapboard church. Thom yawned and tried to find a radio station broadcasting something other than the farm report. His lights flashed on a wooden sign, and he slammed the brakes.

"They were serious," he muttered, watching as the wooden board swayed in the wind, its chain rusted black. The paint was peeling, but enough remained to spell out BUELLER'S HUNDRED. Thom laughed deeply, then pulled his Corvette to the side of the road. This would be a story the boys back in the office would enjoy. He only wished he'd brought a camera.

The ground swelled into a little knoll, which Thom mounted with ease, ignoring the ruins of a fence. The moon obliged him, sailing free of the clouds as he reached the makeshift cemetery. The headstones were grimy and broken, and a few graves were marked only by depressions in the earth. The single intact marker was at the head of the circle, and Thom made a point to examine it. He brushed his fingers over the words COLONEL JESSE BUELLER, C.S.A. BORN 1835 DIED 1862.

Thom stared at the tombstone for a few moments, then laughed under his breath. "Well, Colonel Bueller, I'm disappointed. At least you could have rattled some chains." Something irritating nipped at his ankle, and he reached down to brush it away. "If there's no show tonight, I'll just be taking my carpetbag elsewhere. Goodbye!" The pinch was sharper, cutting into his leg. He looked down to see what had him.

* * * * *

The dust-colored Sheriff's car pulled to one side, belatedly flashing its lights. The deputy driver exited, walked over to the Corvette, then crossed to the cemetery. He halted abruptly, staring down.

"Bueller's boys?" his partner asked, leaning through the open window.

The deputy nodded. "Looks it."

"Damn, Bobbie Joe--that's the fourth this month!"

He shrugged. "Call Doc Hadden. He took care of it the last time."

"He at the hospital?"

"Yeah."

The partner reached for the radio. "Fourth this month," he muttered, fight the static.

The deputy studied the bloody hunks of flesh, then bent to retrieve an object, separating it from what had once been a hand. He jerked at the sound of a backfire. Joe Bueller's battered Ford lumbered around the curve, then pulled in beside the officers' car. The deputy stalked down the hill.

"Mornin', Bobbie Joe," Bueller called, "What brings you out to the Hundred this mornin'?"

Wordlessly, the deputy opened his hand. Bueller looked, then shook his head. "You know how the boys are. I can't do nothin' with them."

"You can't tell them to keep their mouths shut?"

"This was the fourth this month!" the other deputy added, apparently

impressed with statistics.

Bueller sighed. "I can try, but it probably won't help." He looked out toward the knoll. "They don't listen too good."

"Well, try," the deputy huffed. "Now get on, they'll be waitin' for you down at Angie's."

He nodded and put the Ford in gear, moving down the road. The deputy walked back to his car, where his partner was already mopping away the first sweat of a hot summer's day.

"Doc's on the way with a bag. Guess Phil can tow this here sports car." He grinned. "Phil oughta be makin' a killin', huh? A killin'?"

The deputy nodded. He leaned against the car, staring at the button he held in his hand. Though tarnished and stained, the letters C.S.A. were still visible.

"Well, you know what they say," his partner laughed.

"What?"

"The South's gonna rise again."

The Burial

Woman with a tombstone face
In a long dark gown,
Shred the sleeves
And what hangs on the ground.
Paint lids and lashes
Straighten the heavy black hair,
Fold hands across the sunken breast
And bury her with eyes open.

Teresa Sarick

The City of Endless Sorrow

by Janet P. Reedman

Mira Kent caught the last bus to the City of Endless Sorrow in front of the grungy apartment building where she lived. Shoulders hunched, face twisted by a perpetual scowl, she rushed past the dour driver and flung herself into a torn, smelly seat. At the front of the bus the rusty doors clanged shut, then the vehicle pulled away from the corner and its single dusky streetlight.

Mira squirmed on the broken springs of the decrepit vinyl seat, cursing under her breath. She never bothered to glance out the filthy windows, now lashed by a sudden heavy rain. Although her features revealed nothing, she was glad to be returning to the City. She needed to visit it for a night, and to walk among the City's inhabitants, who, like herself, were forgotten and despised.

She absentmindedly played with the ends of her frazzled, dyed-black hair. Oh, yes, Mira loved to see other losers, and to escape the so-called "normal" people--the dull, baby-toting housewives and smiling dreamy-eyed lovers who experienced emotions she had never known and likely never would know.

A stab of jealousy knotted her guts and caught in her throat. Sometimes when black moods took her, Mira wished she could stay in the City of Endless Sorrow forever.

The rain stopped as quickly as it had begun and the night sky cleared, allowing the moon to peep from behind a patch of flying stratocumulus. Mira pressed her sallow face to the window and glared out. Her pulse rate raced when she saw the pale green lights of the City on the near horizon.

Mira tugged the stop-bell as the bus driver veered the vehicle onto a hill just outside the City centre. She wanted to walk, to savor the night. She stepped down onto the curb, which seemed to glow green in the moonlight. Then she ambled down the hill.

Along the path, man-high bushes towered like sentinels. Mira heard a rustling and felt as if she were being watched, yet she knew no fear. Women didn't have to beware of muggers or rapists in the City, for no human could cause physical harm in the City of Endless Sorrow.

Mira strode on, swinging her arms and kicking old cans that clattered into the gutter. Aisles of ugly little marble houses were nestled into the reddish soil of the hillside on both sides of the street. The were consistently dark, lifeless, and forbidding as mausoleums.

Mira veered between the buildings and walked to a deserted skating area. Cracks criss-crossed the dome, black ivy strangled the peeling walls. Mira relished the ruin, the dark, the decay. No virginal blondes would skate with their handsome swains in this rink! she smirked.

She climbed cautiously through unfinished excavations and the charred graffiti-decked shells of abandoned buildings, then, suddenly, she was in the City centre.

It was a weird place. Cars and trucks rolled by, but they were silent

and surrealistic, their lights blinking like amber eyes in the greenish darkness. The denizens of the City echoed the silence. Silhouetted against the lighted windows of countless empty shops, beings hovered on the main drag, moving wraith-like through the exhaust fumes, never speaking to one another.

Mira studied them closely, as she stomped down the street in her hard leather boots. They were her kin: battered women with empty eyes; teen-aged hookers and addicts with needle tracks on their thin arms; winos with half-empty bottles clutched in filthy paws. They watched her as she passed, their faces as pale and bloated like those of drowned men. She rounded a corner and followed a light-less sidestreet to the quay, her favorite spot in the entire City.

The quay, a filthy edifice lined with aged barrels and reeking of bird dung and human urine, thrust out like a crooked arm into a fetid bay. Mira leaned against a railing at the end of the quay and allowed the chill of the bars to seep into her fingers. The cold wind buffeted her unruly hair; gusts of night air moaned in the riggings of half-sunken ships in the bay, creating a sound not unlike the crying of a thousand souls.

Mira sighed. The City brought her no peace tonight, no feelings of importance or superiority because she, of all the City's inhabitants, could actually take the long bus ride home. She shifted her weight anxiously, and stared across the bay to where the buildings of Parliament reposed in a moldering garden. Bulbous, illuminated towers craned skyward like severed head. At the lower edge of the quay, the foul water made a sucking noise, as thought hidden, obscene lips were trying to draw the very stones of the City into a black maw. The sound made Mira shudder. No, she didn't like the City at all tonight.

As she crossed the vacant sidestreet and headed back toward the City centre, she passed rows of mildewed buildings papered in peeling posters that fluttered like spectral fingers in the gloom. She became aware of a man on the road behind her. He wore a shapeless hat and a tattered brown jacket, and he staggered as if drunk. He seemed to be trying to catch up with her.

Impulsively, Mira whirled to face him. No one in the City had ever noticed her before. No one had ever looked at her with anything but dispassionate disinterest.

He glanced up and grinned unpleasantly. His eyes gleamed coldly under the brim of his floppy hat. He made a throaty clicking noise and quickened his pace.

Mira panicked, crying, "No!", and she began to run.

Loose sheets of newspaper caught at her legs and hampered her run. Grit flew into her eyes and blinded her. The man continued to follow her, the vile chuckling grew louder.

Mira caught sight of a partially burned-out neon sigh blinking over the gloomy doorway of a ramshackle theatre. She was panting as she dashed to the box office, where a pale, anorexic girl with bandaged wrists counted faded, crumpled money.

"How much is the show?" gasped Mira.

The girl lifted her head, her eyes were blank. "One," she mouthed.

Mira tore a dollar bill from her pocket and tossed it onto the stained counter, then she rushed into the lobby. She nearly tripped over the toes of a tall, scar-faced usher who sat on a cobwebbed chair in the lobby, collecting non-

existent tickets.

Inside the screening room, Mira tumbled into a decrepit seat. Seat springs groaned painfully and a cloud of dust billowed up, causing her to sneeze. Mira wiped her nose on her sleeve as she looked around. Only one other person was in the theatre, an old derelict in the front row, who wheezed and choked as he smoked stubby cigars and sucked on a gin bottle.

The stage lights darkened and the frayed curtains parted with a squeal of pulley wheels to reveal a screen. White-winged moths flew out of the decaying velvet drapes, battering themselves against the screen. A vintage black and white movie, badly out of focus, began to play. There was no sound, only crackling from an ancient speaker at the far end of the room.

Then, with a loud snap, the aged film ripped in two and the movie was over. Lights flashed, colors smeared over the screen, and the overhead lamps sputtered into life. The wino took a swig from his bottle and slide from the seat onto the threadbare carpet.

Mira decided it might be safe to leave. She carefully returned to the lobby, but as she approached she saw her pursuer, the man in the floppy hat. He lingered at the front door, his white face warped by a half smile, his pale, inhuman eyes glowing.

Mira turned on her heel and rushed to one of the fire doors, skipping over rusted tins and popcorn boxes filled with stale kernels. She flung herself against the door and it opened with a bang. Mira fled into a narrow, sooty alley. Breath clogged her lungs. She stumbled forward, knee deep in rubbish and ordure. The reek stuck to her clothes.

She staggered from the alley on to main street and the bus stop. She didn't know why she was being followed, but she was well-aware of impending danger. For the first time since she discovered the City, she knew fear.

At the bus stop, she squatted on a graffiti-decorated seat and she tried to slow her ragged breathing. She stared at the digital numerals of her watch. Ten minutes to midnight. The return bus would arrive soon to carry her from the City.

She peered down the dark road, straining to catch a glimpse of oncoming headlights, but the lights did not appear. Mira felt sweat trickle down her back. *Please let it come,* she prayed, *I can't stand this!*

Still the bus did not arrive. A crowd of punks, their painted faces lifeless masks buzzed past her. "Wait!" Mira called out shakily. "Can...can you tell me what time the bus comes?"

A girl with an orange Mohawk and cavernous black eyes ringed in violet answered in a thin, hoarse whisper, "No bus here, dearie. Not tonight. Not any night."

"No, no! You're wrong!" Mira leaped from her seat, grasping the girl's cold, bony arm. "I've always caught the bus here!"

'Well, it don't come here no more," the girl smirked, her black painted lips curling. "You must have missed it, honey, just like the rest of us. Missed it--and was never able to catch it again."

"No! I'll catch it!" Mira's eyes grew wild. "And if I can't catch it, I'll walk home!" Mira turned away from the punks and raced up the street, weaving through drifts of litter and stench.

Out of the City she ran, climbing the dark dry hills that ringed the lost

town. Once reaching the top, she discovered herself in a field of swaying yellow grass. She stood panting, her breath coming in gasps. A bitter wind licked rivulets of sweat from her brow. Overhead the moon floated like an age-pocked skull in the stygian darkness and to the South, the parliament buildings of the City of Endless Sorrow gleamed iridescent green against the black lawns edging the stagnant bay.

"Oh, God," whispered Mira, "Where do I go from here?"

She began walking slowly, following an overgrown path through the field. Ahead of her stretched miles and miles of unbroken darkness like a tunnel without walls.

Suddenly she heard the roar of an engine. A bus! Whirling, she saw an old, rackety bus bumping across the field. She waved her arms frantically to flag the vehicle down. With a squeal of unoiled brakes the bus halted and the doors banged open in a shower of sparks. Mira hurried toward it, pulled herself up the filthy steps.

As soon as she had entered the bus, the doors closed and locked with a snap. "Take me home," rasped Mira, "Back to my own town! Take me from the City of Endless Sorrow!"

The driver shifted, tossed back his battered cap. Mira screamed as she recognized her pursuer. "Sit down," he solemnly ordered, onyx eyes glinting in his ghastly pale face.

Mira hunched over in her seat and whimpered. Futile tears tracked down her prematurely aged cheeks as the bus curved around. "Is this my bus?" she sobbed faintly.

"Yes, there is only one bus you can take now, Mira Kent." He pointed to the cardboard sign tacked to the front window.

It read: City of Endless Sorrow: FINAL TRANSPORT.

Ozz

Dragging yourself across the dusty wood
Wearily holding a cross aloft
Do you hold back evil
Or seek sanctuary.
White mist flows beyond.

Marked by a vicious hand
You wear a desperate face
Something crouches in the dark.
Your red satin cape crawls behind.

What were you trying for
On that studio floor?

Teresa Sarick

A Chance Encounter in Haddonfield

by Debbie Coyne

Life wasn't a total loss, Jenny thought, as she gripped the wheel and stared at the white line. She had her health. She had good friends, and a friend was more a treasure than life itself. Wasn't that the saying? So what was her problem?

I'm almost forty, damn it. And what have I accomplished? "I need coffee," she said aloud. She searched the sides of the highway for any sign of what truck drivers tactfully called "choke and puke" joints. She thought she remembered some sort of sign about some sort of stop, or some sort of town, a few miles back. Then, as suddenly as she thought of the sign, there was another one. She eased up the pedal on her aging Buick and cruised to the right lane. The sign said simply, Haddonfield, Exit One Mile.

Jenny seemed to have a dim knowledge of a place called Haddonfield, although why she should know anything about a small burg in Illinois eluded her at the moment. Even if it is small, she thought, it has to have some kind of diner. If she didn't have coffee soon, she'd go crazy.

The exit appeared and it wasn't long before she found herself in Haddonfield. It wasn't as small as she pictured. It even had its own hospital. More importantly, it had a diner.

Jenny parked the car in a lot nearby, grateful to feel solid ground beneath her aching legs. She had been driving a straight ten hours.

Coffee wasn't the first priority, she suddenly thought. Nature had been a-callin', and she'd had her phone off the hook.

When she entered the diner, she was surprised to find it was crowded. Too crowded. They were mostly teenagers, fresh from some school game, she surmised. Nearly every space was taken, all except a far booth in the corner occupied by a young man staring out the window. Jenny wondered why he was alone. Everybody else had somebody. *Look who's talkin'*, she told herself. *You don't have somebody.* He wasn't a teenager like the others, either.

She sauntered casually up to the booth and sort of cleared her throat. No response. "Excuse me," she said, as sweetly as she could force herself, "Do you mind if I sit here?"

For a long annoying moment, he didn't respond. Then he looked away from the window, glanced briefly up at her, nodded, and returned to his contemplation.

"Thanks," she muttered, and she slid in opposite him. She wasn't exactly sure it was a yes, but on the other hand, she didn't care. A waitress practically startled the nature out of her just then. She hadn't seen the approach, just heard the less than enthusiastic, "Can I help you?"

Yes, she thought to herself, *you can get me a doctor for the heart attack you almost gave me.* "Yes, please," she replied, still playing the sweet act. "I'd like a cup of coffee and a burger. Medium rare, and get the

gentleman another coffee as well. Might as well pay for the booth and board."

"Did he tell ya he wanted coffee?"

"No, I just assumed..."

"So did I," she remarked, hands on hips. "Comes in here, sits down, and doesn't say word one. Doesn't even acknowledge me. So I brought him coffee. He had to have something or I'd throw him out of here. Personally, I think he's deaf and dumb..."

I don't need this, Jenny thought. Yacky waitresses were about as much fun as acid indigestion when one needed to visit the john yesterday.

"...and I hope you enjoy the company. At least he's not as loud as these damn kids. Myers should have gotten the whole lot." With this said, she moved off to take care of Jenny's order.

Who was Myers, she thought. *Who cares? I've got to go!*

"Excuse me," she told the quiet young man as she stood up. "I'll be back in a minute. Hold my place." *Right,* she said to herself, *I don't think he even knows you're here. Oh, well, when ya gotta go...*

She came back as quickly as she could. Her space was still free and her companion was still staring out the window despite the fresh cup of coffee beside his cold one. Jenny shrugged it off and practically dived into hers after putting heavy sugar and cream in it.

"Thank you, God, I needed that," she beamed, holding the cup with both hands below her chin. No response from her booth-mate. *What's with this guy,* she asked herself. Maybe he was a deaf-mute like the waitress thought. Or maybe he just heard when he wanted to hear. There were a lot of people like that. She decided to study him for a moment. What the hell. There wasn't anything else to do. Besides, maybe he'd get mad and say something.

He was in his early thirties, probably, like her. Very handsome with short, wavy, auburn hair and the strangest eyes Jenny'd ever seen. They reminded her of shark's eyes. They were almost black. She figured him to be a mechanic or some kind of technician because he wore a dark work suit. She wondered what was in the paper bag he clutched beside him. He held it close, like a mother holds a child. It was a medium size bag, too big for a lunch, but too small for groceries. There was nothing to indicate it being a bottle; and besides, he didn't look like a wino. Suddenly the hairs went up on the back of her neck. She glanced from the bag to his face and found him staring at her.

"Sorry," she could only say, self-consciously. The saying 'curiosity killed the cat' popped into her head for some reason. She tried to console her with 'satisfaction brought it back,' but it didn't work. She felt like one of those lambs tied out in the open to lure the tiger.

"So," she said, feeling stupid afterwards, "What do you do for a living?" The man only stared. "I see. Strong, silent type, eh?" His stare was grating on her nerves. There was almost no depth to his eyes, no soul. The eyes were the windows of the soul, she remembered, but these windows were painted black. "You live around here?"

The man turned away, looking out the window again.

Great, Jenny thought, *just great.*

"Here's your burger," the waitress said, startling Jenny again as she placed it on the table. "Enjoy."

Yeah, sure, as soon as I get my heart out of my mouth. She glanced at her companion again. The arm which protected the bag was now on the table,

and his hand was holding the coffee cup.

Hey, way to go! At least he's accepted my offering. With my luck, he's a mass murderer and I've just become guilty by association. Oddly, she thought she understood him. After all, how many times had she stared out windows and drank alone? Too many times.

"Look, it's okay if you don't want to talk," she told him. "I understand, really I do. I've been there myself." He stared at her over the rim of the cup as he sipped the coffee, but didn't reply.

"I sometimes wonder what the hell's so interesting," she said, taking up his cause and staring out the window. "I'm seeing nothing, yet I'm seeing something. And if I keep it up, I'll be seeing the men in the white coats." The man slammed down his coffee.

Jenny glanced from him to his cup. "Hey, it was only a joke." *Shit*, she thought, *I think I have a genuine nutcase here.* Wasn't there a sign for an asylum some miles back? She smiled nervously. "Actually, my life's a joke." *Keep talking, Jenny. And smile.* "It's like the beaver said. One dam thing after another." The man picked up his coffee and began to sip it again. Jenny eased up. "I'm thirty-two and what have I accomplished?" At the moment, she couldn't care less if he was concerned about her. If she couldn't talk to a psychiatrist, she'd settle for the next best thing--a nut.

"Most women my age are either married with a family, or sitting behind a desk making more money in a week than I do in a year. I couldn't even really afford this trip across the country, but I had to take it. I had to get away. I had to get away from everything which reminded me what a failure I was. I've never attended school reunions. You know why? The inevitable question would be, 'so what have you been doing?' And I'd have to tell them how I was in the pet business for ten years, tried a hand at filmmaking, and now sell movie material to people whose lives are as empty as mine." She could imagine the response: Oh, really? How interesting.

The man said nothing as Jenny paused to sip her drink. His eyes seemed softer now, she noticed. Maybe there was a soul there, after all. Maybe it was because he understood her plight. How did he manage it, she wondered. Did he have friends to keep him going, too?

"You know something," she smiled, "I really shouldn't complain. I have my health, good friends, I enjoy my hobbies, and I love my car. I make do with what I have. And it usually works out. And it doesn't say in the Bible to go forth and make money, does it? Maybe I'm not exactly multiplying, either, but one of me is quite enough. I'm too independent to be responsible to, or for, anyone else. I definitely do not have a motherly instinct. Sometimes I think I was born without a libido. But what the hell."

As she again sipped her coffee, she felt her eyes begin to tear, and it wasn't because her life was nowhere. It was because, for the first time, she realized she was truly somewhere. Dorothy was right. Happiness was never really farther than your own back yard. She smiled at the man and covered his hand with hers. He glanced at it, but didn't pull away.

"Thank you," she told him. "I really needed to talk to someone. I'm really glad I met you. You'd make a great brother." Now he pulled his hand out from under hers, only to cover it with his. Jenny smiled, and was pleased to receive the gesture in return.

"Well," she said, finally pulling her hand back. "I'd better get going. I

have to get back and get my job back. I will, too. Lots of people quit there; but they always seem to come back. The boss doesn't care. He's a pussycat. Care to walk me to my car?" Jenny fished for, retrieved, and dropped three dollars on the table, noting that her quiet friend wasn't being chauvinistic about her paying the bill. She then got up to head for the door, followed by the man and his paper bag.

When she got to the car, she turned and smiled. "Nice, huh? I figure I live in the past most of the time, so I might was well drive it. Thanks for the escort. You want me to drop you anywhere?"

When he didn't answer, she wasn't surprised. For a fleeting moment, she thought she'd be disappointed if he did. She smiled, then turned to open the car door. She was just about to get in when she felt his hand on her shoulder. She glanced around at him.

"Change your mind about the ride?"

The young man studied her for a moment with his mysterious ebony eyes, cocked his head from side to side, and then held out his bag. Clearly an offering.

"Thank you," Jenny said softly, as she took it, hoping inwardly it wasn't grapefruit, old underwear, or something dead. She moved forward and kissed him gently. He returned her embrace hesitantly, so she pulled away. When he turned and walked away. Jenny watched until he was out of sight before getting into the car.

As long as she'd live, she'd never forget the strange young man from Haddonfield. And he was young, she told herself insistently. Thirty isn't old, damn it! After all, physical age didn't really matter. It was your state of mind that mattered. For now she wouldn't feel bad about her somewhat juvenile nature. She was luckier than most. She knew that now. She smiled once again as she fondled the paper bag in her lap. And now, behind curtain number one, she mused, as she opened it and peered in.

Great. The good Lord got gold, frankincense and myrrh, she laughed to herself. What do I get?

A Hallowe'en mask.

Rhyme

You scared me in the mirror
I saw you moving there
A far-off light was on
In the dark you wore a gown
You were there again
I couldn't call you friend
You've kept me up all night
Hold and make me write
In the shadows of moonlight
I cannot even fight

Teresa Sarick

So Long As There Is Love

by Kelly Hill

"So long as there is love, there can be no death;
So long as there is love, there can be no parting;
So long as there is love, there can be no twilight."

-- "Mrs. Delafield Wants to Marry"

The church was quiet when Jack Killian entered. Not many parishioners made their devotions this late--an hour before midnight was for those who had no other time to come in, too heavy a problem to sleep, or nowhere much else to go. Jack dipped his fingers in the font at the door and made the sign of the cross; and, as he walked toward the altar, he checked out his fellow worshippers. There was an older woman near the middle who looked as if she'd been installed at the same time as the pew. Near the front, a young man, barely out of his teens by the look of him, sat with his hands clasped on the back of the pew in front of him, silent tears silvering his cheeks. The look on his face wasn't one of sadness, but of profound joy, his face shining with the glow usually only associated with saints or holy lunatics. Jack could only speculate which one he was, but was glad for his happiness. Somebody deserved it tonight.

At the bank of votive candles, Jack lit one of his own and stood at the altar rail, hands in pockets, looking up at the crucifix behind the altar. The agony of the figure on the cross was something that, for the third time in his life, Jack could relate to. The first time was when his mother died after a painful, but mercifully brief, illness. The second time was after the accident that cost him his partner and nearly made him swallow his gun. And now again, the loss of someone he loved brought him face to face with the pain. Just before dawn, he had held Tina for the last time, before the sisters came to take her away forever. Tina, quick of wit and of temper, who he never stopped loving even when they fought. Tina, a pain and fear-wracked shadow in the hospice bed, terrified as a small child of the dark she knew was waiting for her. He had held her, talked to her, and she smiled for him at the last.

With the morning coming up, he wandered the wakening city and found some of his own comfort, and a new friend. The ginger kitten, now named George, had made himself quite at home in Jack's apartment, taking advantage of the new litter box and trying to climb the curtains. When Jack fell into bed, too exhausted to fight it anymore, George curled up on the pillow next to him and kept watch. He woke up to the feeling of a scratchy tongue cleaning his chin. When Jack left, the kitten was happily playing with a twist of newspaper and an old sock with a knot tied in it.

He hadn't known when he set out that night he would end up at the church, but his subconscious mind knew him better than his conscious one. With the candles flickering soothingly in the dim light, he felt for the first time

that day he could think rationally.

Okay, she's with You now. Take good care of her, she's a good lady--but I guess You know that already. Get Rusty to give her a tour, and introduce her to my mom--they'd get along great. Jack felt his mouth turn up in a slight smile at a memory--his mother putting her firm Irish foot down on his brief pre-adolescent flirtation with becoming a priest. "God will probably punish me for it later, but you're my only chance at grandchildren. Mary was a mother, too--she'll understand." After being brought up by one fiercely independent woman, it was little surprise that he'd fallen in love with another one.

Jack felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see Father DiMaggio behind him. "Hi, Joe. Working late tonight?"

"I had a feeling you might be by. I heard about Tina, Jack. I'm sorry."

"How did you know?"

"Tina came to see me after Rusty's funeral. She knew you and I were friends, and wanted someone to talk to. When I visited the hospice, she remembered me, and asked me to give her last rites a few days ago."

Jack had to wait a moment before he could trust his voice again. That was very like her--afraid of dying, but making plans for it anyway. "I'm glad it was you. Got a minute to talk?"

"All the time you need. Have a seat." The two men sat on the front pew, dark hair and blonde catching highlights from the candles.

"Tina made me promise, six months ago, that I wouldn't be sad." The words began slowly, then tumbled out of Jack. "I know she's out of it now, that nothing can ever hurt her again, that it's selfish to wish her back here. But I...miss her." Tears welled in the hazel eyes and he took a deep breath, fighting them back. "I thought I got all that out of my system last night. You know, it wouldn't be so bad if part of me didn't feel like it's all my fault. I drove her away, Joe. After Rusty died, she tried to get through to me, but I was too busy trying to drown in a bottle to listen to her. I hurt too bad to realize she was hurting, too. If I could have gotten my act together sooner, she'd have been with me, not with that bastard who gave her AIDS."

"And you stopped her from killing him and making an even bigger mistake," the priest reminded him gently. "Tina was a grown woman, and what she did, she did because she wanted to. I'm not saying it was the right thing to do, but it was her choice. I wish I had some answers why things turn out the way they do, Jack--if I did, I'd cure everybody's troubles. But I can't; all I can do is fix what's in my power to fix. And that's all you can do. There was nothing you could do to cure Tina, but you did what you could to make the time she had left the best it could be. Right now, maybe that's not much comfort. But here's something for you to think about--because of you, she didn't have to leave this life alone. Too many people with AIDS have no one at the end. I think if there was any kind of debt, you paid off at least part of it last night."

It was a long moment before Jack replied. "You sure you're not Joyce Brothers in drag, and just doing the priest bit for kicks on the weekends?"

DiMaggio shrugged and smiled. "What can I tell you? Black's always been my color." Then, more seriously, he continued, "Part of it is seminary training--we got a lot of psych shoved at us. But most of it is plain common sense. Part of Tina will always be with you, because you loved each

other. Grief is natural, normal, and healthy, but it doesn't last--and it shouldn't. Love does last, and it's what gets us through this sorry old world sometimes."

"Listen, could you do me a favor?" Jack asked.

"Name it."

"I'm not sure just how good my standing is with the Man these days, so would you put in a good word for her? She deserved it, even before all this happened to her."

"Well, I don't think my prayer will carry the same weight as yours right now, but you got it." The priest glanced at his watch. "And you'd better hustle out of here, or you'll be late for work."

Jack shook his head. "I've got plenty of time. Besides, I think Billy'd stroke out if I ever made it in early." After a pause, he said, "You know, last night I prayed for a miracle. In a bass-ackwards kind of way, I think I got one. I got the chance to say goodbye."

"That's more than a lot of people get," DiMaggio said.

"Yeah. Thanks for letting me bend your ear."

"My pleasure. And thank you--I think you gave me an idea for a long overdue sermon--come to Mass on Sunday and check it out."

"On AIDS?" DiMaggio nodded. "Don't you like your job? What's the Bishop gonna say about that?"

"Not much. He does a fair amount of visitation at the hospitals and hospices, and he had a cousin die of AIDS a few months ago."

Jack nodded in sympathy. "I'll be here Sunday. Listen, leave Friday night open if you can, okay?" he said as they walked toward the door.

"What for?"

"Tina's wake. She'd want you to be there."

"Will they want a priest there?"

"Obviously, sir, you have never been to an Irish wake. The priest is usually the first to arrive and the last to leave. If you're worried about standing out, come in civvies, but be there. I'll even borrow the boss' car and come for you. Seven o'clock. At least that way I know I'll have somebody to get me home in one piece."

"Aha, I knew there was a catch! Why not? It'll be a new experience for me." At the door, DiMaggio traced the sign of the cross in blessing for his friend. "Take care, Jack."

"Thanks, Padre. You know, I wish you could have really known Tina. She didn't take crap off anybody--especially me," Jack said with a wry grin. "When you talk to your Boss tonight, give him my sympathy--He's gonna have his hands full with her!"

"Well, listening to heavenly choirs all day has to get a little dull. Maybe the place needs some shaking up."

"Could be. See you Friday night." Jack walked out into the quiet street and hailed a cab to the station. The pain was still there, but it was being softened by a core of warmth, like an icicle melting under the first thaw. It was going to be a cold winter, but spring would be beautiful.

LIFELINE--
OCTOBER 17, 1989

by Kelly Hill

For one night
strangers became friends
barriers came down
help was given
without being asked

That one night
families were torn apart
and brought back together
friends feared and waited
rejoiced and wept

On one night
an electronic lifeline
spread over the city
a light in the darkness
the voice of a friend

A Fiend in Need

by Susan M. Murrie

LAPD's top forensic pathologist, Dr. Jack Brittington, had his head buried in paperwork when he heard someone knocking on his door. "Come in," he called, not bothering to glance up. Sometimes it seemed he spent more time at the word processor than he did inside a corpse.

Jack tried not to frown when the Greek god stepped inside. After all, it wasn't Detective Nick Knight's fault he was tall, dark-haired, and fair-skinned, or that half the policewomen in the precinct had crushes on him. Jack wasn't ordinarily a jealous man, but he couldn't help comparing himself to the handsome cop, and mildly resenting the fact he suffered by the comparison.

"Hello, Det. Knight. What can I do for you?" The pathologist wasn't ugly, but his face was ordinary, bordering on plain. He was three or four inches shorter than the plainclothes policeman. His mousy brown hair was still thick, but his prematurely receding hairline made him look ten years older than Nick Knight, when there were actually--he'd guess--only a few years between them.

"I just came to check on the Liebmann autopsy." Knight was wearing a black leather jacket he shouldn't have been able to afford on a cop's salary.

"We dug two slugs out of him from two different .38s. Ballistics says it was his own gun that killed him. Sgt. Ramirez only wounded him," the bespectacled doctor announced.

"Suicide?" Nick asked.

Jack nodded. "With as much dope as he'd had in his system, Liebmann probably hadn't known what he was doing."

"Carlos'll be glad to hear that. It was the first time he'd had to shoot anybody. I'll call the hospital and let him know."

"How is he doing?" Jack asked, more out of courtesy than from curiosity.

"Getting better, but bored. Nothing to do but lie in bed and watch TV. One of the nurses told him it would give him a chance to catch up on the soaps."

Jack shuddered. "I don't know how anyone can watch those things."

"Me either. Me, the only things I watch are news and sports. PBS once in a blue moon. There's nothing but garbage on the networks."

The forensic pathologist nodded his head in agreement.

"Say, Jack, did you catch the Dolphins game the other night?"

"Yeah, I did, but it's Dr. Brittington, if you don't mind. Not Jack."

Nick raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Hey, how long have we known each other now? A year and a half, two years?"

"If you wanna be Nick, that's fine, but I prefer 'doctor'." Jack smiled to show there were no hard feelings and changed the subject.

They talked over the Dolphins-Rams game for a few minutes before Nick remembered what he came for in the first place and picked up the

autopsy report. He started to leave, then stopped at the door. "You know, I just realized. You guys are the only ones that the professional ethics rules about doctor/patient confidentiality doesn't apply to. Forensic pathologists tattletale."

"Who, me?" Jack pretended to be offended. "I'll have you know, sir, that I am as silent as the tomb," he declaimed melodramatically. Chuckling over his own joke, he apologized, "Sorry for the gallows humor. Occupational hazard."

Nick's full, red lips parted, revealing teeth that were too perfect. Jimmy Carter or the Osmond brothers would have been jealous of his smile. "Good. That's what I need."

"Hey, if you have a medical problem, Knight, go see your regular physician. I only work on the dead."

"That's what I need," the detective repeated. "You might want to sit down."

"Oh?"

Nick hesitated, unsure how to begin. Jumping in headfirst with both feet, he blurted out, "I'm a vampire. I need your help to change me back to human."

"What?!"

"I'm a vampire. I need someone to find a cure, to find a way to bring me back. Someone like you."

"A vampire. You mean, like Bela Lugosi, 'I vant to drink your blood' type thing?"

Nick nodded.

"Is this a practical joke? Or do you need a psychiatrist instead of a pathologist?" Jack Brittington demanded.

"You don't believe me," Nick said quietly.

"No, I don't."

Nick closed the Venetian blinds. Taking a deep breath, he turned to face Jack. The forensic pathologist stared. Nick's eyes glowed an eldritch red. His teeth had stretched into fangs. He rose and levitated two feet above the floor.

"Oh, my God."

"Now do you believe me?" Nick asked as he came down in front of the desk.

"I...believe," Jack conceded, collapsing into his chair.

"Then you'll help me?"

"No."

"But I need you!"

"I don't know if you need a hematologist or an exorcist, but you sure as hell don't need me!"

"I need you," Det. Knight repeated, a desperate edge to his voice.

Jack looked away, suddenly remembering the legends about vampires' hypnotic gaze.

"Do you know what it's like to go centuries without seeing a rainbow?"

"Centuries?" Jack murmured.

Nick continued. "To never see the city by daylight, to never see flowers in bloom or anything green and growing. Do you know how long it's

been since I saw children playing? The closest I ever come is when I bust some punk for making a drug deal."

His bitter words stunned the pathologist into silence.

"Please, I need your help," Nick told him.

"I don't know anything about vampires. There's nothing I can do to help you," Jack replied.

"But I need you. You're a pathologist. You're used to dealing with death and the dead."

"The dead, yes. Not the undead!"

"Hey, most of your patients can't give you any active help. I can answer your questions, tell you whatever you need to know."

"But..."

"I'll make it worth your while. I have money."

Jack looked up, insulted. Nick either didn't notice, or misinterpreted the expression on his face.

"I've got money," he repeated, "as much money as you want. Tax free. Name your price."

"Now wait a minute."

"I can make you rich. The savings of several mortal lifetimes...all yours if you can heal me."

"Get out of here," Jack ordered. "I can't be bribed and I won't be bought."

"Please," Nick pleaded, realizing too late he'd made a mistake in tactics.

"Get out of here before I call security." The pathologist's voice was cold.

"Okay." The vampire bowed his head in surrender, but Jack was too angry to notice.

"You've got ten seconds," he threatened, "before I tell security what you are."

"Okay," Nick repeated. He walked out, stopping at the door to turn and face Dr. Brittington. In a sad, bitter voice he retorted, "Don't bother. No one will believe you. That's always been our greatest strength."

Jack watched him as he left, and shivered.

* * * * *

Jack looked up when he heard the knock on the door. He went a shade paler when he saw the vampire standing there.

"The captain wanted to know if you had anything on Atholl yet," Det. Knight asked.

"The lab doesn't have the test results back yet. They're backed up, as usual." The pathologist didn't quite keep the tremor out of his voice.

"Overworked and underpaid--the joys of working for the city," Nick agreed casually, pretending not to notice Jack's nervousness.

"Why does a va--uh, someone like you work for the police department?" Jack regretted the question as soon as he'd asked it. Every late night movie he'd ever seen said that vampires didn't like prying.

In a very quiet voice, Nick replied, "I have a lot of debts to pay back." He turned away, unwilling--or unable--to face Jack. His eye fell on a pile of

books: Anne Rice's The Vampire Lestat, Barbara Hambly's Those Who Hunt the Night, Alex Burstein's Nightlife, Bram Stoker's Dracula. "I see you've been to the library since last week. Burstein makes me nervous. He's off on one or two things, but most of the book is accurate enough to make me wonder where he did his research. Hambly's fairly close, too."

Jack swallowed uncomfortably. He didn't want to believe Nick Knight was real.

"Dr. Brittington, please. I need your help. Do you know how long I've waited to find someone I could trust?"

"I'll call your captain when I have the lab reports on Atholl." Jack tried to change the subject.

"You're a scientist," Nick continued. "Aren't you curious? Don't you want to be the first to solve a medical mystery that's plagued the centuries?"

"You sound like Leonard Nimoy on In Search Of...," the forensic pathologist told him coldly.

"Isn't that why you became a doctor, though? To help people, to solve problems? I'm a person. I have a problem--a medical puzzle half the Mayo Clinic would give their eyeteeth to solve."

"So go to the Mayo Clinic." Jack managed to keep his face impassive, his voice stern, but Nick was right. That was why he'd become a doctor. It was almost as though Nick had read his application to medical school.

"I can't trust them. You, you're a police pathologist; I'm a cop. I know you won't betray me. Please, Jack. I need your help," the vampire begged.

"It's Dr. Brittington."

"Dr. Brittington," Nick corrected himself. "Sorry. I checked your record. With your grades, you could have become anything you wanted to be: a surgeon, a pediatrician, a dermatologist. You chose forensic pathology, one of the toughest branches of medicine, where the patient can't help you and the doctor has to be a detective. You solve mysteries for a living. And I'm the biggest medical mystery you're ever likely to see. And I..."

Jack interrupted. "If you're done with police business, Det. Knight, you can leave. I'll call your captain when I get the results back from the lab.

"Pl... All right. Sorry to have taken up your time, Doctor." The vampire walked out, slamming the door.

"What do I know about curing vampires?" Jack asked himself in an unsteady voice. "I'm not Pasteur or Semmelweiss. I'm damned sure not Van Helsing. I couldn't do anything for him if I wanted to."

He picked up the phone to call security, started to dial, then stopped. If he called and said LAPD had a detective who was a vampire, they'd haul him off to a looney bin. "Maybe I should call County Mental Health and tell them we've got a cop who think's he's a vampire. Let them deal with it if he really is one." He started to dial again, then shook his head and set the phone down. Knight trusted him not to betray his secret.

* * * * *

The vampire slammed the door behind him and stormed down the hallway. The few clerks that saw him scurried out of his way. Rounding the corner, Nick stopped and leaned against the wall, fighting to regain his self-control. "Damn!" Balling his hand into a fist, he punched a two-inch hole in

the wall.

He pulled his fist out of the wall and dusted off the plaster. "I probably shouldn't have done that."

Sighing, he ignored the med-tech staring at him and trudged down the corridor back to the Homicide office. He'd waited so long to find the right doctor: someone with the skills he needed, someone with imagination enough--open-minded enough--to accept a 20th Century vampire without freaking out. And most important of all, someone he could trust, someone who wouldn't betray him to the National Enquirer. He'd watched Jack Brittington for almost two years, observing him, asking questions of his co-workers, hacking into his records. Jack had seemed to fit all his qualifications. But now that he asked for help, Jack had said no.

LeCroix would have laughed at him for asking help from a mortal, Nick knew. A century ago he wouldn't have asked. He would have ordered Jack to cure him, frightened him into obeying if necessary. Maybe drunk enough of his blood to steal his will. But in the first place, this was 1989. You couldn't get away with that anymore. In the second place...Nick sighed. In the second place, it was wrong. It had been wrong in the old days, but LeCroix, his master, the vampire who'd created him, had always laughed at his protests and scruples, and eventually he had stopped protesting. And in the third place, Dr. Brittington would need the full use of his faculties and free will. Nick had to be able to trust him. There was nothing to keep Jack from administering the true death when he was supposed to be curing him.

Nick had been so sure Jack was the one he'd been searching for. He was one of the most respected men in his department, and although he'd refused to help, he hadn't turned Nick in. That was something. But if Jack wasn't the one, where could he turn to for help? The other police pathologists he'd considered and rejected months ago. Maybe he should just give up this crazy quest for a cure--either accept the curse, and 'live' the next few centuries as a vampire, or deliberately seek out true death. He'd tried that once before, during the Depression. Sunrise suicide. It had taken months to heal from the burns.

It had all seemed so wondrous when LeCroix had promised his immortality. To be forever young and handsome, to be powerful...that was what his master, his creator, had promised. LeCroix hadn't lied about that. But he hadn't bothered to mention how homesick Nick would become for daytime. LeCroix had told him that he would be as a god among lesser, mortal men. LeCroix hadn't mentioned how tired he would become of killing, or how disgusted he would become with himself for treating ordinary humans like insects waiting to be squashed. If such sentiments had troubled his vampiric master, LeCroix had shed them long ago. Nick, however, seemed to grow more squeamish as the years rolled on, rather than less, or so LeCroix had complained.

The detective murmured to himself, "What good is living forever if you're not really living?"

Jack Brittington had seemed like his first decent chance of escape in ten years. He'd been so positive that Jack could help him, he'd never bothered to wonder if Jack would help him. Not for the first time, Nick Knight wished vampires could cry.

* * * * *

Jack Brittington heard his office door open. A tall, dark shadow fell over his desk. Hesitating a moment, he forced himself to look up, afraid of what he expected to see. A strange expression came over his face when the vampire stepped inside his office.

Det. Knight raised his hands in surrender. "Easy," he said, "I just came to pick up the Atholl file. Nothing else." His voice lingered on the word 'nothing'.

The forensic pathologist pointed. "It's on the desk."

"Thanks." He glanced up at Jack once, then looked away. Not daring to raise his eyes to the doctor, he walked over to the steel desk and sorted through the manila folders on the corner until he found the Atholl file.

"If I were crazy enough to agree to help you and I failed--and I probably would--what's to keep you from silencing me to keep your secret?" Jack demanded.

Nick's heart leaped. Hoping, but not daring to hope, he replied, "Why bother? No one would believe you. But you want to know how to protect yourself from me."

Jack nodded.

Nick smiled wryly. "The safest way would be to have a cross tattooed above your carotid artery. The legends about crosses and garlic are true. Eating a clove of garlic a day would protect you, but I wouldn't be able to get close enough for you to be able to work on me. Probably your best bet would be to wear a cross on a chain. The necklace won't bother me if you keep it under your shirt, but it'll keep me from snacking while we're working."

"What about holy water and wooden stakes?" Jack wanted to know.

"Don't believe everything Hollywood tells you," the cop hedged. Crosses and garlic, that was one thing. They were purely defensive. Holy water and wooden stakes were for killing. The doctor didn't need to ask about them.

The pathologist didn't look convinced.

"When I was still mortal, a man's word was enough," Nick reminisced bitterly, "but I guess I can't expect you to trust me."

"You're trusting me," Jack pointed out reluctantly. With your very life, he thought. Or unlife.

"I don't have any choice. I'm...completely at your mercy." He smiled ingratiatingly, knowing the doctor hadn't been born yet who didn't love to play god.

Jack Brittington swallowed, almost overwhelmed by the total trust the vampire was offering him. "What--what if I cure you too well? Turn you mortal and then you die?"

"If you could promise me a sunrise, it might almost be worth it," Nick whispered. "Throw in a rainbow, I'd skip the almost."

Inhaling and exhaling deeply, Jack looked away from a long minute. Finally, he turned back to Nick and ordered, "Close the blinds."

"Huh?"

"Close the blinds, I said."

Surprised by the tone of command in his voice, the plainclothes detective hastened to obey.

"Take off your shirt." Jack measured Nick's blood pressure, pulse, and temperature. "According to these readings, you should be dead."

"I am," Nick reminded him.

Jack ran a finger along the four-inch horseshoe-shaped scar over the cop's right breast. Almost omega shaped, he realized with a shudder. "What this from?"

"That's from when Le--when I was made a vampire." He looked up at the pathologist wistfully. "Can you bring me back?"

"I don't know," Jack confessed. "I won't make any guarantees...but I'll try."

Nick sighed with relief. "Good enough."

"It won't be easy," the forensic pathologist warned.

"I'll do whatever you say, Dr. Brittington," the vampire promised.

"Damn straight you'll do what you're told," Jack snapped. "You follow orders or the deal's off."

"Yes, sir." He saluted, only half in jest.

"Call me Jack."

Nick Knight smiled, his fangs glistening.

Nick's Lament

A creature shunned by daylight,
caught fast between two worlds.
Consumed by darkling hunger,
its curse around me furled.

When life's immersed in scarlet,
and drowned by victim's cries,
time loses all its meaning,
as those around you die.

I longed to live forever,
not knowing all that means.
Condemned alone in darkness,
a demon lost in dreams.

The sun sings out her siren song,
a beauty wrapped in light.
I'd give my soul to dance with her,
caged in no more by night.

Few friends to ease my passage,
no love to share my pain.
Held tight within a nightmare,
afraid I'll go insane.

Please, dear God, release me,
let my Hell be done.
I'd gladly die tomorrow
to walk beneath the sun.

Its warmth so sweet upon me,
bright colors in my eyes.
My beast forever banished,
I'd share a lover's sighs.

The sun sings out her siren song,
a beauty wrapped in light.
I'd give my soul to dance with her,
caged in no more by night.

Till then I'll walk in shadow,
atone for all my sins.
I'll fight to find the magic
so I can live again.

Barbara A. Staton

Peace Officer

by Charlotte L. Desilets

Sergeant Bubba Skinner signed in and noted the time, writing "18:57" in the space beside his name. Then he hung his hat on the coat rack and surveyed the nearly-deserted police station. Nothin' like a flu epidemic to clear a place out, he thought.

A sneeze exploded at Bubba's shoulder; reflexively, he backed up a step.

"You look like hell," Bubba said.

Lon Jamison, turning away to blow his nose, took a noisy moment to reply. "I feel worse." He pulled out another handkerchief and mopped his streaming eyes. "You change your work shift?"

"Naw. Just workin' an extra four to cover for Parker." His voice echoed faintly. Bubba put his small gym bag on the counter and took off his winter jacket. "Virgil still here?"

Jamison covered another sneeze with one hand and semaphored toward the Chief's office with the other.

"Hey, Virgil." Bubba paused in the doorway.

"What?" Sparta's Chief of Detectives, Virgil Tibbs, sat at his desk, head bent over a cup of coffee. He looked up, blinking, wondering what Bubba was doing here. Of course, Virgil thought, he's here because I called him. "Come in, Bubba." He leaned back slowly, hands splayed across his face, fingertips pressed to his sinuses.

"You don't look too good, neither," Bubba observed. "Chief still feelin' poorly?"

"He said he'd try to come in tomorrow morning." Virgil came forward again, in slow motion, until his face was poised over the steam rising from the cup.

"If he don't come in, I can work another shift."

Virgil regarded the big sergeant, one of the few members of the department not felled by the flu. That's just like Bubba, he thought. Helping comes as naturally to him as shining to the sun.

"There's no need," Virgil replied.

"Already worked extra this week," Bubba pointed out. "It don't bother me none."

"If you work too many extra shifts, you might wear down and catch this bug. And if you go down sick, Bubba, we may as well give up and close the station."

"Close..." That heresy made alarm flicker across Bubba's face before he decided that Virgil was only trying to make a joke, but the joke was too close to the truth and brought him back to business. "How many we got on duty tonight?"

"You and Leroy are out on patrol, and Lonnie and I are covering here. Wilson won't be in for a few days. I had to send Parker home, and believe me,

he didn't want to go." Though I wouldn't mind going home myself.

"That's spreadin' it real thin."

"There's not much else we can do. Four from the day shift are due back tomorrow, and if the Chief can come in, we'll get by. If not..." Virgil conceded a point. "You might find yourself in charge."

"Can't keep the peace from a desk," Bubba said.

"You may have to, if the Chief and I can't beat this."

"Okay," Bubba replied, and Virgil had a fleeting vision of Duty, running doggedly, trying to keep up with Bubba Skinner long enough to whisper low, "Thou must," only to find that Bubba already had, taking on responsibilities above and beyond the call.

He shook off the image, aggravating his flu-ridden sinuses in the process.

"Why don't you take somethin'?"

"I don't want to fall asleep," Virgil said. "Where were we?" He tried to pick up the thread of the discussion. "The two of you probably will manage all right on patrol. So many people are ill, there won't be anyone out getting into trouble. There's no third shift at the mills--not enough people to work. The superintendent may close the schools tomorrow. Most of the students were out today, and half the teachers as well."

"Winter break starts next week. That'll make the kids unhappy--three extra days added to their vacation, but they'll be too sick to enjoy it."

"Green Christmas, full graveyard," Virgil murmured.

"Huh?"

"It's a saying up north. When winter is warm, or changeable, people get sick more often."

"There's somethin' to that," Bubba agreed.

Another whoop erupted from Jamison.

Bubba frowned toward the front office. "He keeps that up, there ain't gonna be a window left in this place."

His matter-of-fact observation made Virgil start to laugh, but the pain jabbing through his face quashed the laughter down to a groan.

"I'll get goin', then," Bubba said, and went back out to the desk. VIrgil watched him talking with Jamison as he prepared to leave.

Street cop, Virgil thought. That's what Bubba will always be. Where Philadelphia measured its Thin Blue Line in the hundreds, Sparta counted in tens, but numbers didn't equate with quality, especially when Sparta's front line could boast of Bubba Skinner. Street cop and peace officer, in the oldest sense of the term, maintaining order so that law-abiding people could go about their business, unthreatened and unafraid. Though he could come down hard on transgressors, Bubba would never use his job to be a bully; as he saw it, being a cop meant being at hand to help, and standing guard over the community. The Guardian of Sparta. Lord, I haven't had as much as an aspirin, and I'm getting light-headed. Virgil almost dismissed the thought; Bubba would have ridiculed the whole idea as a damn-fool notion. But as Bubba squared his Stetson and went out the door in a fusillade of Jamison's germs, Vigil felt a shift, an easing of his responsibility as its boundaries shrank down to the parameters of the station. The Guardian of Sparta was going out on patrol.

Bubba pushed the bag over to the passenger side of the seat, then shut the car door. He glanced up, gauging the weather. The sky was still heavily overcast, and the drizzle continued, neither stopping nor turning into rain. But the wind was rising, raw and cold. He pulled his jacket zipper up to the collar. This ain't a fit night for nobody to be out if they don't have to be.

Clipping the hand radio to his belt, he crossed the street and started rounds. The Magnolia Cafe was closed. He checked both doors, and looked through the back window, where a small red light indicated an active alarm. Then he went on to the next block. The line of storefronts was dark, except from the streetlights, fuzzy behind the drizzle, and whatever security lights had been left on by the owners.

Across the business district, from Church Street to Elm, back along Monticello to Conyers, Reynolds, Washington, and Clark, he followed a zig-zag pattern, plotted out so that by the time he had made the full round, all front and back entrances would be checked.

Bubba knew the round from years of making it. Every step was second nature, so that he could divide his attention, noticing any movement, a passing pedestrian or car, or something out of the ordinary that would alert him to further investigation. Tonight there was no activity, his own footsteps the only human counterpoint to the rising and falling whistle of the wind, rattling the dry leaves on the oak trees in the square and making the drizzle patter against the windows.

In an alley, a gust of wind toppled a pile of cardboard boxes. Bubba sent the flashlight beam against the walls and fences, found nothing else, and gave the alley a cursory inspection while he tried the back door of the jewelry store. The knob didn't give, but as he looked inside, he noticed there was no alarm light.

"Lonnie?" Bubba spoke into the radio and waited for response.

"Yeah, Bubba?" Jamison's voice came back, followed by static. Bubba was reaching for the squelch knob when he realized the interference was only sniffling.

"I'm in the alley back of Washington St. You got the home number for Mr. Fletcher? His shop is locked up, but the alarm ain't set."

The radio whooshed back at him, then honked and snorted. Bubba shook his head. We be in a bad way if Lonnie's well enough to work and there be people worse off than he is.

"We've got it here somewhere, Bubba. I'll call him and get back to you."

"Okay." Bubba put the radio away and went on.

He was on the the last part of the round, heading back toward the police station, when the radio crackled.

"Come in, Bubba."

"Yeah, Lonnie."

"I called Mr. Fletcher. He's sending his son down."

A mini-van came around the square. As it passed Bubba, the driver waved. Bubba raised a hand in recognition.

"I see him. I'm gonna start the car patrol pretty soon now."

"Bubba." Virgil's voice came over the air. "Leroy just called in. He had to take his kid to the hospital. You'll have to cover the whole route."

"Okay. If nothin' happens, I can do five or six."

"Don't rush. Better to do fewer rounds, but done thoroughly."

"Whatever you say." The courthouse clock sounded as he signed off, and he finished the round.

In the car, he let the defroster warm up for a few minutes, then turned on the wipers. An arc of clear window appeared, but after a moment the wiper blades started squealing across the glass. The drizzle was coating the windshield, but not enough to let the wipers run smoothly. He shut them off. Just have to run them every few minutes, I guess. He looked around carefully before backing out into the street.

A few cars were driving out of the parking lot at the First United Methodist Church as Bubba approached. A black town car, discreetly affluent, stopped and gave him the right-of-way. The next vehicle kept coming and hit the rear of the town car. Bubba had a quick peripheral view of the black car's front end coming at him, and he wrenched the steering wheel sharply in a defensive manuever. The cruiser's rear skewed around, skidding across the wet street, until its spiral was stopped by the tire hitting the curb.

For a few seconds Bubba sat, gripping the wheel, pushing the brake pedal to the floor. Finally he took a deep breath, carefully put the cruiser into "Park," and turned the control, sending blue and red swirls across the buildings. So much for nothin' happenin' tonight, Bubba thought, reaching for his flashlight.

The cruiser's headlights illuminated the drivers, both elderly ladies, as they emerged. Mrs. Kinney slammed the town car's door and strode back to inspect the damage, then turned on the other woman.

"Why didn't you stop?" Mrs. Kinney shrilled. "Didn't you see that I had to wait for that police car? I almost hit it!"

"Oh, what am I going to tell my husband?" Mrs. Truitt's voice wailed up the scale. Bubba winced slightly. She's gonna bring out the fire department if she don't quiet down.

"You can tell him you were tailgating!"

Deliberately ignoring them, Bubba walked past toward the cars. He knew Mrs. Kinney by reputation, as a pushy, arrogant woman who seemed to think her support of the church constituted ownership. She was wealthy enough, and her donations sizeable enough, so that other members, including the minister, hesitated to put her in her place. Parker, active on several committees, complained regularly about Mrs. Kinney's interference and had even referred to her, less than reverently, as "Mrs. God."

Bubba shone his light on the damage, a broken taillight and a broken headlight. Getting a replacement for the taillight wouldn't be a problem, though it might be another matter for the ancient Plymouth, a thirty-year-old ark with tail fins. He flicked the beam sideways as a figure appeared from the door of the church hall. The minister came over, buttoning his raincoat.

"Evenin', Reverend."

"Hello, Sergeant." Reverend Hillman viewed the two cars with dismay. "Oh, my. I should have cancelled that Missionary Circle meeting tonight. We didn't even have a quorum."

"Well, maybe you can get them two calmed down some, while I start an accident report."

"Ladies, please," the minister began, but he was no competition for

Mrs. Kinney, who was in full cry.

"This is all your fault, Ellen, and do you know why? Because you're silly and scatterbrained, and can't keep your mind on anything for more than a minute. The State of Mississippi should have taken away your license years ago. I expect you to pay for every cent of the damage and--"

Bubba got into the cruiser and closed the door, shutting off Mrs. Kinney's tirade, then called in for an accident report number. By the time he returned to the driveway, Mrs. Kinney showed no sign of running down.

"Ellen Truitt, you make me tired!"

The phrase put Bubba in mind of the chief, settling office squabbles and interjecting a frequent, "Sometimes I get so tired!" He ducked his head to hide a smile. Wonder if we sound like that to him?

He had to interrupt. "Miz Kinney...Miz Kinney, ma'am, you have to move your car."

That deflected Mrs. Kinney away from Mrs. Truitt, but didn't lessen her fury. "No, I won't."

"Miz Kinney," Bubba said, "if you don't move the car, I'll have to."

"Bubba Skinner, you keep your Baptist nose out of this!"

"Yes, ma'am, I am keepin' my Baptist nose out of it. It's my police department nose that I'm stickin' into it. And your car is stickin' out half-way into the street. That's why it can't stay there."

"I won't move the car until the insurance agent has come out to see the damage."

Bubba tried to explain. "Ma'am, the law don't require that. I'm fillin' out an accident report, and your agent will take pictures of the damage, and that's all. Not like anyone was hurt."

Mrs. Kinney was already shaking her head. "No, no, no. My husband told me the car has to stay where it is until the agent takes pictures. My husband said--"

Reverend Hillman broke into the conversation. "Why don't we go inside? You can call your husband and find out what he wants you to do. Both of you come in." The minister tried to guide the ladies toward the church hall, but Mrs. Kinney was having none of it.

"I am not moving, and I am not moving the car, until the agent comes to take pictures."

Bubba considered his options, dismissing the possibilities of arresting Mrs. Kinney for obstructing the street or breaking the anti-noise ordinance. Not exactly procedure, but if it works, he decided. "Miz Kinney, I got a camera in the trunk of the cruiser. Supposin' I took pictures here, then would you move the car?"

She was beginning to calm down, and actually considered his offer quietly. "Very well, Sergeant," she said, "but I'm going to call my husband. He'll back me on this." She marched away toward the hall. The minister looked at Bubba and shrugged, then escorted Mrs. Truitt after her.

So far, so good, Bubba thought, returning to the cruiser. He got the camera and took pictures from several angles. The flash fired every time, thanks to Lon Jamison's meticulous maintenance of the department's photographic equipment. By the time he was done, the ladies and the minister were coming back out. Mrs. Truitt was wiping her eyes but had stopped crying; Mrs. Kinney, having been told by her husband to cooperate, had settled for silent

indignation.

"Is there anything else you have to do here, Sergeant?" Reverend Hillman asked.

'Yes, sir. I need to see the registrations for these cars, and the ladies' licenses, and their signatures on this here report."

Mrs. Kinney handed over the documents. She was too much of a lady to throw them at Bubba, but she snapped the license and registration toward him with a flick of the wrist indicating her disapproval. Mrs. Truitt finally extracted her license from a purse rivaling the Marianas Trench; to help things along, the minister got the registration out of the Plymouth.

Finally the paperwork was complete. Mrs. Kinney signed the form and dotted the "i" with a crack that almost put a dent in the clipboard. "Now then, Sergeant," she said, "I hope you aren't going to ticket me for driving with a broken taillight."

"No, ma'am, not if you drive straight home," Bubba answered, giving her the report number. "But you get that fixed as soon as you can. Tell your agent to call the station for the pictures."

"You can be sure I will. And we all know who's going to pay!" She got in the town car and drove away, the taillights leaving one white smear and one red smear on the wet pavement.

"I'm going to see Mrs. Truitt home," the minister announced as she signed the report. "Her car can stay here."

"I'll move it for you, ma'am," Bubba said. Taking the proffered keys, he started to get into the car and banged his knee on the steering column. "What the hell?" he muttered, ducking to keep from getting his hat knocked off. The seat, in its forwardmost position, had two cushions on it. No wonder she hit that other car. Bet she has to peek out between the steerin' wheel and the dashboard to see where she's goin'. Bubba managed to fold his long legs into the cramped space long enough to back the car into a spot by the church hall.

"Thank you for being so patient, Sergeant," the minister said. "You know how it is..."

"No trouble, Reverend. Watch out for the glass there."

"I'll have the sexton clean it up first thing tomorrow. Good night."

Bubba turned off the roof lights, started the cruiser, and pulled up enough so he could back into the church driveway. Then he turned back in his original direction and continued down Conyers Street.

The town clock chimed nine times.

A whiff of wood smoke came wafting in on the warm air from the defroster. The associations it brought made Bubba smile to himself as he patrolled the residential district. Could be a Christmas card, he thought, looking at the houses stretching away down both sides of the street, windows full of warm yellow light. Except there ain't decorations, and no people. On any night in late December, regardless of weather, the neighborhoods would be bustling, with residents going visiting, to holiday programs at churches and schools, carolling from door to door. On this night late in February there were no festivities, just a sense of retreating to shelter, a drawing-in against the cold.

Guess Parker and the cats called it quits for the night, Bubba thought, passing a neat frame house with a big porch and curtain-shrouded windows. Further down, Joann's place was also dark, except for the upper half of the

front door, its clear center pane bordered by stained-glass rectangles, lit by the porcelain desk lamp in the hall. At the Tibbs' house, the big double-windowed dormer shed light across the porch roof; Althea was still up. Bubba hardly spared a glance for his own steep-gabled house, where no one waited.

The circuit brought him back to Monticello Street and the square. The younger Fletcher had long since returned home, and the minister's car was back under its carport. There was no other traffic out on the roads.

Bubba looked back and forth along Montecello Street as he drove, taking an inventory. The pharmacy's windows spread illuminated squares across the sidewalk; it wouldn't close until eleven. Security lights shone dimly in the courthouse, but at the police station, every window blazed, belying the few on duty.

Around the corner, something out of place jumped at him. The library was supposed to close at nine, but it was still open. He parked the cruiser and went up the steps, watchful.

Bubba stopped at the glass door to scan the desk area. There was no one there, so he went inside. The voice of Mrs. Norwich, the librarian, came from one of the reading rooms.

"I said, you cannot stay here past closing time. You have to leave."

Mrs. Norwich turned her head as Bubba came in. "Why, hello, Sergeant Skinner," she said, much louder than was necessary. "I'm glad you're here."

"Havin' a problem, Miz Norwich?" Bubba asked.

She nodded toward the teenager copying from Current Biography. "This young man came in right before nine, and he refuses to leave."

Bubba recognized the boy, a slow kid just marginally above being in a special needs class. Not a whole lot at home in there, he thought. He moved closer and looked at the tablet paper where the boy was taking down information in a painful-looking scrawl only a few lines long.

"You're breaking the rules and you have to leave."

The boy glared up at Mrs. Norwich. "No." He settled his bulk for what he intended to be a long stay.

"What did you say to me?"

"I said no. Gotta write a report for school."

In the boy's refusal, Bubba heard the echo of Mrs. Kinney. This is gonna be a night when everybody's wantin' to be difficult.

The book was open to an article about Magic Johnson. Bubba turned a page; it was a long piece.

"When's this report due, Georgie?"

"T'morrow."

"And when did you get this assignment?" Mrs. Norwich asked, rapping her keys on the table.

"While back," Georgie muttered.

"Then you should have thought about that before." Mrs. Norwich did not suffer fools gladly; she was known in "Conan" in high school circles.

Bubba, remembering how Georgie had plagued Coach Dailey for some kind of job with the team but on getting it rarely showed up for practice or games, doubted that the boy understood any concept of thinking ahead. Only the simplest approach was going to work.

"If you stayed here all night, you still wouldn't get this done. So just

go home." He waited for the boy to absorb what he was saying. "If you don't, I'm gonna have to take you in, and call your daddy, and he ain't gonna like havin' to leave work on a night like this to come bail you out."

The mention of his father brought a response. Georgie lumbered to his feet and collected his papers. "Need this t'morrow."

"Well, maybe school's gonna be called off tomorrow. And if it is, you can come back." Bubba amended his statement. "But you come here when the library's open, not one minute before closin'. Go on, Georgie, get 'long home."

The boy moved off, so slowly he seemed to be on the verge of stalling out several times, but finally disappeared out the front door.

Mrs. Norwich slipped her keys into her pocket. "I feel sorry for him, but he can be a problem. If he's allowed to get away with something once, he keeps trying it over and over. If you hadn't come along, I would have had to call you."

"That's all right, ma'am," Bubba replied. "You all alone here tonight?"

"Yes. We thought we'd try staying open, even though most of the staff is on sick leave, including the building engineer. Usually he puts out the late campers."

"Well, ma'am, if you're still short-handed the next late night, and there's somebody here won't move, don't wait. Call and we'll take care of it. And if you're workin' alone, we'll stop in on every round. You need help lockin' up?" Bubba asked as they walked back to the desk.

"All done except the lights and the front door."

"I'll wait and see you out, ma'am."

"That's so kind of you. I'll be done in two shakes." She looked at him, thinking back, seeing not the cop but the little boy hardly big enough to peek over the top of the circulation desk.

Mrs. Norwich was as good as her word. In a couple of minutes she was back, her coat on, her plaid scarf snugged around the collar. She turned off the last few light switches.

As Bubba held the door for her, she said, "We don't see you around here as often as we'd like, and I don't mean for law enforcement either. How long has it been since you've stopped by for a book?"

"I don't have much time to read, ma'am."

"There's always time to read." She let her glasses slide down her nose, and peered at him with mock severity.

"You used to tell me that when I was in high school," Bubba said, smiling.

"I used to tell you that when you were in grammar school. It hasn't changed."

"No, ma'am." Bubba took her elbow as they went down the steps. "Now you drive careful."

"I will."

He waited until she was on her way before he returned to patrol.

Maybe nothin' else will happen tonight, Bubba thought, as he waited for the Amtrak to pass. Beyond the tracks lay the county road and the long stretch of night patrol, out past the farms and Bradford Woods.

The last car rattled past, going north to Jackson, and the warning bells' last clang died into silence. Bubba drove the cruiser carefully over the

tracks. The county road was as quiet as the rest of Sparta. There were only a few cars parked in front of the colonnaded brick motel. The shopping center stores looked alike, long expanses of brightly-lit show windows full of furniture and hardware, flowers, toys, shoes, draperies, and mannequins incongruous in spring pastels and bathing suits, but no salespeople and no customers. On the interstate, angling across the countryside, long cones of light went ahead of the occasional passing truck.

Bubba took a left on Turner Lake Road. The high beams swept across the winter woods and turned the drizzle to white streaks as he followed the twisting way. Woodland fell away to dun fields at every farm. The road started rising, in a long climb up Sparta Hill, and Bubba's lighthouse gaze moved across the landscape. Near the crest, pyramids of logs were stacked beside a narrow dirt road snaking through the trees. Seth Wilkins is sledgin' timber, he thought. It was a yearly occurrence for as long as he could remember, the passing of late winter marked by Wilkins' progress through the woodlot. In the orchards, piles of pruned branches waited to be picked up an carted away. Where farmers tended winter crops, equipment stood ready; fallow fields hibernated until the last frost in March.

As he reached the top of the hill, the wind hit the cruiser and almost pushed it into the other lane. Bubba worked the brake judiciously all the way down. Not gonna risk bringin' on a wreck tonight. Ain't made one whole route around town yet.

Below, sheltered in the hollows, ghost-wisps of fog drifted through Bradford Woods. Overhead, the trees arched across the road in a tangle. The wind was cut, but the overall cover seemed to intensify the darkness. Every quarter-mile or so, roads led off to the west, to lakefront homes. Bubba shone the cruiser's searchlight down each drive. Nothing was moving except for a fat, old, well-upholstered raccoon waddling down Huell Cobb's driveway. It turned to look at Bubba, then continued its unhurried way. Watch out, fella, if you mean to keep your hide. Old Huell don't like trespassers of no kind.

Halfway along the road, he came to the Chief's house. Won't hurt none to take a closer look. Bubba walked down the drive, a familiar path. The Chief's red-and-white truck was parked under the trees, and the house was dark. He made a circuit of the immediate property, his light moving slowly along the frontage, where thin patches of ice lodged, like bits of broken glass, among the yellow stalks of cat-tails. The lake, troubled by the wind, lapped against the little pier. Moving around to the back, Bubba scanned the woods, hunching his shoulders as the pine boughs slopped water onto him. Assured that all was as it should be, he went back to the cruiser, aware of everything in his surroundings except for the man who stood at a bedroom window, holding the edge of a curtain aside, watching.

The lakeshore curved away to the west; houses were fewer and ended altogether as the terrain gradually turned to marshy wetlands. A deer, browsing along the roadside, was startled by the cruiser. Its eyes reflected the headlights for an instant, then it went bounding away into the trees. Bubba slowed to watch as the white-flag tail vanished into cover. Then he turned his attention to the next checkpoint.

Wonder if the roadhouse is open. That place draws trouble. Be hard to handle tonight if there is any--

A yellow flash flared briefly. Bubba stopped the cruiser, then backed

up slowly. What the hell was that? Ain't no animal, and it ain't swamp gas neither. Too sharp to be swamp gas. Looked like the reflector on the side of a car... He stepped on the brake as the bright amber rectangle glowed, held in the beam of the cruiser's headlights. The car was well-concealed in a thicket, with only an odd break in the branches allowing a glimpse. Bubba retrieved his flashlight and moved toward the vehicle. As he approached, he saw there were a couple of overgrown ruts leading off into the woods. Probably goes out to some blind, he thought. Cut brush was piled up a few yards in, but it was loose and fell away when he touched it, revealing a late-model sedan.

One glance told Bubba he'd walked in on someone's mobile rendezvous. The car windows were fogged, so that when he shone his light on them, all he could see were two heads very close together. Bubba's knock was ignored at first. That is what I call a heavy session. He reversed the five-cell flashlight and used its handle to thump on the door. The two heads parted and the window rolled down.

"What you want, man?" the teenager inside demanded, his immediate anger losing its impact when his jaw dropped.

"Deavers?" Bubba aimed the light into the face of one of his senior linebackers.

Eric Deavers stared, gulped, and managed to regain control of his jaw so he could try an ingratiating smile. "Hi, Coach!"

Bubba cocked his head, and gazed at the boy with a weary expression reminiscent of the Chief on one of his lesser days. "Deavers, Deavers, Deavers," he intoned.

Uh, I guess you want us to go home, right, Coach?" Eric looked over at his date, nodding strenuously as a cue.

The girl, whom Bubba recognized as one of Althea Tibbs' drill-team members, stared at Eric, then caught on. 'Yes, Sergeant Skinner, we were just about to go home."

"Yeah," Deavers agreed enthusiastically, starting the car.

"Yeah," Bubba repeated. "And Deavers."

"Yeah, Coach?"

"The next time you want to keep company, find someplace private and safe. This time I found you, but you keep hangin' around this roadhouse, there's no tellin' who might come along."

"Aw, Coach," Eric protested, "nothing could happen. The roadhouse is closed."

"Tonight, maybe, but it ain't always. Askin' for that kind of trouble is a dumb play."

"Yes, sir." Deavers put the car in gear and started forward, pushing the remaining brush out of the way, and headed back toward town.

Hope he takes the warnin', Bubba thought, returning to the cruiser.

He was reaching for the door handle when he heard a faint clatter. He looked around sharply, trying to locate the sound past the wind. It came again, a distant metallic ring.

It's comin' from the roadhouse. He drove for the crossroads.

Bubba pulled up in front of the squat, shadowy building. A single bulb, shaded by a ruffle of corrugated tin, hung over the front door. They don't believe in spendin' a whole lot on security. He opened the car window a

couple of inches.

A thump came from behind the building, a definite sound, no trick of the wind. Bubba reached for the microphone.

"Lonnie?"

"Yeah, Bubba."

"I'm at the roadhouse. There's somebody or somethin' movin' around out back, makin' a lot of noise. I'm gonna check it out."

"You want back-up?"

"Naw. Might be just some animal foragin'."

"Bubba, don' take any chances," Virgil's voice put in. "See what the situation is, and call for back-up if you need it. We can be out there in a few minutes."

"I'll be careful."

Bubba put the microphone back and got out of the cruiser, leaving the door open. He drew his revolver and ran to the side of the building. Metal rattled, like a trash barrel rolling back and forth on pavement. Bubba, standing with his back to the wall, gripped his gun. Might be a hobo, or an animal. He moved sideways, a foot at a time. The nylon shell of his jacket made a squeaking sound against the fake log siding, and he took a half-step forward. Might be nothin' at all. Might be a prowler. A dim light defined the far end of the roadhouse; there must be another low-wattage bulb over the back door. Bubba halted for a moment at the corner, and took a deep breath. No takin' chances. Then he jumped into the open, gun pointed and elbows locked in a combat stance.

"Police! Hold it!" he bellowed.

Virgil hovered over the radio. "Call in, Bubba. Call in."

Lonnie started to get up. "Do you want me to drive out there?"

Virgil hesitated. "Let's give him a minute more." Then he brought his fist down on Parker's desk. "Damn! I wish I hadn't let Leroy take the whole night off."

"We can still call him back."

"I know, but..." Virgil tried to shut out the worst-case scenarios crowding into his mind, memories of incidents in Philadelphia, sirens responding to the radio's frantic "Officer down!" He remembered one in particular, a motor officer who was ambushed and just managed to call for help. But he couldn't identify himself or relay his position, and the dispatches had to run a roll call over the air, while the rest of the force searched the city. The officer bled to death before they could find him. Virgil's imagination changed the Philadelphia warehouse to the Sparta roadhouse, the officer from a stranger to the closest of his Sparta brothers lying in his own blood. Oh Lord, Virgil implored, if anything happens to Bubba, how will I tell the Chief?

"That does it," Virgil said, standing up suddenly and wobbling a bit as his sinuses protested with a fireworks display of pain. He shook it off. "I'm going out there. You call Leroy and tell him to meet me at--"

"Lonnie?" Bubba's voice came through. Virgil, more than halfway to the front door, turned around the beat Lonnie back to the radio.

"Bubba, go ahead." The radio didn't disguise the rise in pitch, the little-boy squeal that took command of Virgil's voice when he was stressed or

surprised, and it didn't get past Bubba. "Are you all right? What happened?"

"I got him."

"But are you all right?"

"Never better. He gave up without a whimper."

"What did he tell you?"

"Nothin'. He ain't talkin', but he's only about six months old."

"What?" Virgil was almost drowned out by a sneeze; obviously Jamison was keeping close tabs on the transmission.

"I got in custody--" Bubba began, then broke off as his prisoner bounded into the front seat. "Get back there," he commanded, fending off a lolling tongue that almost succeeded in swiping him across the face. The felon took the gesture as an invitation to play and barked loudly.

"It's a dog?" Virgil's voice hit a high that hadn't been a norm since he was nine.

"I got in custody a half-grown Golden Retriever. Got no tags, and looks like he's been livin' out of garbage cans for a while." The dog had discovered the gym bag on the floor and was scrabbling at it. "Hey, quit that." Bubba rescued the bag, with his sandwiches intact, and pushed the dog into the back seat.

Laughter rolled back across the radio, the levity of relief.

"Hey, Bubba, nice collar," Lonnie said.

"Doggone good job," Virgil added. He could barely get the words out before he started laughing again.

Bubba put a hand to his forehead, then addressed the dog. "The flu finally got to them. Virgil and Lonnie are crackin' up." The dog yipped once. "Yeah, I think so, too." He pressed the mike button. "Just for that, you get to clean up all the mud and tracks in here. I'm headin' over to the animal shelter, and I'm gonna try to make it without bein' slobbered to death."

"Check in when you get there," Virgil's voice advised. "Or better yet, keep the line open. I'll send Lonnie out as back-up in case you need help." Ill-disguised chuckling followed.

"Thanks, Virgil," Bubba returned. "I know I can depend on you. Don't know for what, though." He cut off transmission before he started laughing himself. The dog, delighted with human company, barked in his ear.

"Hush up," Bubba ordered congenially.

The trip to the shelter took him back across town; the dog settled down, staying in the back and looking around with interest.

"Good boy," Bubba said. The retriever responded by leaning across the seat and resting its head on his shoulder. "How come you ain't got a home, huh? Good dog like you ought to belong to somebody. You wander off and get lost?" In spite of the dog's poor condition, the fleshless ribs under the thin ratty coat, signs of utter lack of care, it had known kindness sometime. The pup showed no fear, and it trusted him.

"Bubba?"

"Go ahead."

"I called the animal shelter. They were getting ready to close, but they'll wait 'til you get here."

"Good enough. Thanks, Lonnie." He put the mike back. The dog panted in his face, its breath still redolent of the chop bone it had been gnawing on when caught red-pawed in garbage robbery. "If old Parker saw you, he'd

have plenty to say about folks not takin' good care of their animals. Now if you had a collar and tag, I could get you straight home." Unless your folks was real bastards and dumped you out on the road in the first place.

As Bubba turned into the shelter driveway, several dogs burst into the outdoor runs and started barking. The retriever set up a racket of its own and launched another attempt to get into the front. Bubba took hold of the makeshift collar and lead, and got the dog out of the car; once on the ground, the pup planted its enormous feet and plunged toward the building, towing Bubba like a water skier behind a boat. The dog didn't stop until it was up against the wire, yapping joyfully at the disgruntled Doberman inside.

"Come on, boy," Bubba encouraged, twisting his fingers into the collar to exert more force. The retriever reluctantly allowed itself to be pulled to the door.

Bubba waited until his suspect was bedded down in a warm, dry run and stuffing itself on a generous bowl of dog food. As he left, he noticed that the drizzle had stopped. Wind's changin', he thought, turning into it. The clouds were beginning to move, and a few stars were visible. He took deep breaths of the chill air and watched the condensation trail away. Clear by mornin', likely.

The mills lined the river, identical multi-storied brick blocks housing the diversified manufactures of textiles, plastics, computer parts and cables. It was a long, slow part of the tour, but not particularly demanding; all the companies had their own security guards, sparing the regular police patrol building-by-building checks. Bubba let the cruiser crawl along in first gear while he scanned Industrial Drive. A cat sprinted across the street in front of him, and leaped fluidly to the top of a fence.

A gradual downhill, the road followed the river into The Bottoms. There the same quiet prevailed. Ordinarily, the night life went on until all hours, but not tonight. Some homes evinced occupants still up, others did not. Strings of bright Christmas lights, a year-round decoration festooned across the front porch of the makeshift convenience store, swung back and forth in the wind. Bubba made a few random turns into side streets. He passed Darlene's, shut without benefit of a police raid. The irony struck him funny. Flu bug did what we can't.

The three o'clock freight was on time, a long train that clacked past in slow motion. Bubba, parked at the county road, finished his ham sandwiches. Pouring out some coffee, he held the cup a moment, letting it warm his hands. The black liquid, just barely on the safe side of scalding, felt good going down, and he savored the simple pleasure of hot coffee on a cold night.

Bubba hit the brakes and stared hard at the barn. On his earlier rounds, it had been closed. Now the door was slightly open, a square outlined in yellow cracks. Too early for milkin', Bubba thought. Must be trouble.

He turned the cruiser up the farm road. As he made the slight curve, the headlights picked up a white van bearing a caduceus with a superimposed "V".

"Tom?" Bubba went into the barn, pulling the door behind him.

"Down here," a rasping voice replied. Bubba went down the broad

passage, between the double row of dairy cattle, through a door leading to the closed-off back section. In a stall, Tom stood over the vet, who moved his stethoscope across the side of a yearling Ayrshire bull.

"I saw your light. Got a problem, huh?"

Tom lowered a bandanna from his face, then raised it again to muffle a blasting sneeze. "Yeah. I couldn't sleep anyway, so I come down to check..." Tom cut loose with another that made the bandanna billow. bubba kept his distance. "...Check the stock," Tom continued. "Found this one down, so I called the vet." He wiped his eyes on his sleeve.

The gesture turned Bubba's thoughts back to the station. Wonder how Virgil and Lonnie are doin'.

"Found him down like that," Tom repeated. He looked ready to go down himself; it was a toss-up as to whether he or the bull were in the worse shape.

Dr. Briscoe, completing his examination, patted the bull's neck. "It's not as bad as it seems."

"He got the flu, too?" the farmer asked.

"No, he's got an upset stomach."

"Thought he wasn't eatin' much," Tom said.

"We'll have to run a tube into him. The stuff's outside."

"I'll give you a hand," Bubba said.

As the vet opened the truck, he asked, "How's the department?"

"We're holdin' on. Lonnie's in the same shape as old Tom there, and he's still workin'. We're lucky all the troublemakers be sick, too."

"I see what you mean." Dr. Briscoe selected some pieces of equipment and handed them down. "Every time I go out on a call, the animals have only routine ailments. The farmers are dragging themselves around, and some of them are almost too sick to stand up, but they're out in the barns, working."

"Yeah, the stock don't care how you feel," Bubba said.

Back in the barn, the vet fitted a gag on the bull's head. "Now, he's not going to like this, but he's not feeling too good, so he may not be up to objecting. Just in case, though, you get hold of his tail."

Tom nodded into the sodden bandanna.

The bull struggled somewhat as the gag forced a gaping yawn; it shook its head a little, one horn bumping the wall. Carefully, the vet worked the tube into the animal's stomach, poured two cans of the medication into the attached container, and started squeezing the hand pump.

Bubba watched the procedure; he was no stranger to stock or their care. Tom's Ayrshires were unusual in an area where most of the dairy herds were Holsteins. The bull was a beautiful animal, with its dark chestnut coat, and the gracefully curving horns that turned up and out. Looks like a little longhorn, Bubba thought. All we need now is cowboys.

The liquid medication gurgled down the tube, its aroma mingling with the pungent smells of animal, hay, and ammonia.

"Smells like yeast and...malt liquor," Bubba said.

"Chemically, that's pretty much what it is," the vet answered. "Though they'd never sell much of this stuff on a Saturday night at the Alibi Loun--"

Tom, seized by a sneezing fit, dropped the tail. With the distraction gone, the bull hoisted its rear end and started to get up.

"Whoa!" the vet yelled, from sheer reflex.

Bubba jumped forward and tackled the bull, getting it into a creditable headlock. He brought all his weight to bear on its neck. As long as the head's down...

"Hang on! Close the door! Don't let him pull out!" Dr. Briscoe was shouting orders in all directions, trying to keep the tube still with one hand, the container steady with the other, while shifting back and forth like a cutting horse. Tom scuttled to the stall door and slammed it shut. It hit, bounded open, and he had to go back and close it again.

But it ain't latched, Bubba thought. This animal goes, that door ain't gonna stop him. And if the main door ain't shut all the way, there's nothin' between him and the county line. He tightened his grip on the near horn and put on as much leverage as he could manage. His position, half-sprawled across the neck, was precarious. The bull made another effort, and Bubba momentarily felt only disbelief as his full weight was lifted clear by the taurine earthquake.

Bubba's feet hit the floor, and he tried to gain purchase by bracing his heel against boards worn smooth. No way to dig in...not even an old nail stickin' up. The bull seemed to read his thoughts, making a lateral move as if to go around the vet, and carrying Bubba along as if his weight were no more hindrance than a fly's.

Tom grabbed the nose ring, and the bull froze.

"Just in time," the vet said.

"Yeah," Bubba answered. He let go of the horns and leaned on the bull's back.

"He ain't a mean bull," Tom put in, defending the pride of his herd. "He just don't like what you're doin'."

"That's okay, boy," Bubba told the bull, slapping its flank. "I expect I wouldn't like it none, either."

"All done," Dr. Briscoe announced. He closed off the tube and withdrew it, then removed the gag. "Nice work," he added. "Old Bear would have been proud of you."

"Old Bear coached football, not rodeo," Bubba said. "Ain't done much stock work in a long time."

"You haven't lost the touch."

"Yeah, thanks."

"Stand back," Tom advised.

Bubba and the vet retreated to the door, and Tom released the bull. Rather than charging, it stood still, working its tongue in and out, and swallowing a few times. Then it shook itself.

"He'll feel better now," Dr. Briscoe said, as Bubba slid the bolts on the stall door. They went back to the main barn.

"Hey, Tom, how you doin'?" Bubba asked. The farmer sat on a hay bale, hunched into his bandanna.

"Gotta start milkin' soon," he wheezed.

Bubba glanced across at the twenty cows. It was a small herd by Sparta standards, but an overwhelming job to a farmer down sick.

"You got anybody you can call?"

"Eula'll be up soon."

"I'll stay for a while," the vet said. "I want to make sure my patient's

going to be all right."

"Okay. You take care, Tom." Bubba went out, the farmer's thanks following him.

Patrol was coming down at last to an uneventful end. Bubba drove one last tour, leaving Turner Lake Road and making the circuit of Lakeview and Westview that brought him back to Brown Bridge Road. When he got to the top of Turner Hill, he pulled off, parking on an overlook that faced the lake. There was some coffee left in the thermos, so he drank it, and watched the sky lighten.

The morning star hung like a flare just above the horizon. Under a gray-white sky, the countryside was a study in gray and black monochromes. Slowly the sky took on a pale yellow, that intensified to a deep orange, shot with red, as the run rose. Shadows raced toward the west, and the terrain's winter colors came to life vividly in the first rays.

From the hilltop he could see the whole valley. All the farms were awake and active now, their lights strung across the landscape like border beacons.

Time to get goin', Bubba thought as the sun cleared the far hills.

Sparta itself was up and doing in a small way, as those few citizens who could, pursued their regular activities. The county road had a few commuters on their way to the interstate. At the sawmill, the growl and whine of equipment sounded down the slope; a trickle of cars turned into the parking lots at the mills. The pharmacy was opening for a group of customers already waiting, and a couple of workers went into the Magnolia Cafe. Sparta's one patrolling officer observed it all.

Without consciously timing it, Bubba drove the cruiser into one of the department parking spaces just as the town clock chimed seven. As he turned off the headlights, the white neon letters over the front door blinked out.

Good tour, thought Bubba. No trouble, nobody hurt, nobody dead. Everything's the way it should be. He picked up his bag and went up the steps to the station. Whether or not he faced another shift was of no concern. All was well in Sparta, and Bubba Skinner was content.

Ad Infinitum

by Denyse M. Bridger

Stepping out of the noisy warmth of a crowded Pub, Victoria drew in a deep breath. The air was heavy with moisture, and chill, but she revelled in it for a brief, luxurious instant before she began walking.

The ethereal, velvety darkness settled over her like a well-worn cloak, and she felt a familiar peace touch her heart. The click of her footsteps seemed to echo loudly on the cobblestones. She drew her long, hooded cape closer to her, noticing with detached awareness that the street was virtually deserted.

"Good," she murmured in genuine relief. She'd had enough people around her for one evening. She was uncomfortable in crowds. Always had been for reasons she herself didn't fully understand.

She slowed her steps after a short time and allowed her surroundings to register in her mind. A swirling grey fog hung over everything, casting an eerie, shifting luminescence on the night. Looking downward she could scarcely discern the street beneath her feet. Rolling curls of smokey, cloud-like mist unfurled and drifted over the cobbled ground. The sounds of merriment and people were dim and distant now.

"Perfect night for a murder," she thought with macabre humor. But the 'Ripper' hadn't been seen here for years, had he? A dark thought indeed, she noted. And, as she had often noted in the past, she felt no fear. For as far back as she could remember, the darkness held no terror for her. The opposite in fact. It lured her with almost seductive appeal.

Coming to London had been the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. Somewhere in her mind, Victoria had always felt certain she would find here the happiness that had eluded her most of her life. London had become her obsession of late.

A wishful fancy, she conceded with a sigh. Several months had passed, and each day the feeling of being lost grew stronger. Yet she stayed, drawn in spite of herself.

She pushed aside the threat of another flood of tears and once again turned her attention outward. She had reached an ancient cemetery. For long, indeterminate minutes she stared beyond the wrought iron gates. The dense, clinging fog had dissipated slightly. The glowing, silver moon that hung in the sky like a bright beacon cast a white radiance over everything it touched.

Victoria felt the cold ache of loneliness leap into her throat with almost strangling intensity. It was followed swiftly by an old, burning rage. A hopeless, despairing anger that was born of isolation.

Taking several deep breaths, she forced the turmoil into submissive silence within her mind. She grasped the icy cold bars of the gate, clinging to them in confused uncertainty. Then, with almost mechanical movement, she pushed the gate open and walked into the silent graveyard.

For a time she strolled around, aimless and blind. But then she began reading the names on the stones. Slowly she began to realize that she <u>was</u>

looking for a name. A name from her childhood. A name she no longer remembered clearly.

With the realization of this in her mind, Victoria felt the first taste of fear she had known in a very long time.

"It's got to be here," she cried, almost frantic with fright. She put her hands to her head and closed her eyes, trying to will the name to emerge from the recesses of her memory. Still it remained hidden. A crippling sense of loss washed over her. Never in her life had she felt this incomplete--this empty and alone. The shocking force of it was choking and paralyzing.

With a gasping sob, she began to run.

Blindly she ran, only distantly aware of the wind that rose and seemed to follow her. The rows of stark, chilling tombstones blurred and became a streak of whiteness at the edge of her vision. She ran on, until there was no place else to run, and she hadn't the strength left to go on.

Almost screaming with a terror she could not name, Victoria fell toward the base of a huge, weathered tree. Clinging to it, she felt the tears rise within her and pour forth. The exhausted trembling that racked her body seemed to diminish against the shuddering sobs that broke free of her. Even the anger that had consumed her earlier faded and died, leaving only the emptiness and loss.

She had no idea how long her grief had held her, but eventually the shudders subsided. Slowly awareness began to penetrate her ragged senses. As always, her attunement with the night was acute. And she felt the air itself cease its stirring.

The sense of time suspended grew more tangible. She rose and looked upward, beyond the stillness of the unmoving foliage of the tree. The moon loomed with glaring brightness, staring down on her with malevolent coldness. The stars had emerged and studded the blackness of the night sky like tiny pinpoints of icy fire. A shiver whispered along her spine.

"Victoria."

Weakness threatened to overcome her and she shook her head. That voice belonged in a dream, she heard her mind insist. It wasn't real! It was the dream--the one that had haunted her life all these years. The reason for her tortuous loneliness.

"Alexander?" She heard her voice utter the name naturally. And, as though compelled, she turned. He stood a few feet away from her, tall and proud. Behind him she saw the crypt. Von Hyde was carved ornately above the open door. Alexander Von Hyde--the name she'd fought to remember. The name she'd searched a lifetime for.

"I have waited for you, Victoria," he said with loving, warm softness.

"Almost twenty years," she acknowledged. Her eyes wandered over him, memorizing every detail from the shining, polished boots, to the raven-black hair that fluttered almost imperceptibly. He was just as he'd been that far-away summer. Her hand rose and touched the tiny scars on the left side of her neck. Scars she had worn since her tenth birthday. When the dream had first come to her. Suddenly she understood. She stepped toward him, and looked up into his eyes. Midnight black, yet lit with a flame that ignited a like fire within her. He smiled, and she saw revealed in the pale moonglow the gleam of razor sharp fangs.

"Love me, Alexander," she whispered with a smile of her own. She

wrapped her arms around him with a contented, peaceful sigh. The sharp pain that shot through her momentarily was quickly replaced by the most exquisite rapture she had ever imagined. Her head fell back as tears trickled from her closed eyes. She would never be alone again. He had waited for her, as he'd promised. Her expression was one of blissful happiness...

Fie on sinful fantasy!
Fie on lust and luxury!
Lust is but a bloody fire,
Kindled with unchaste desire,
Fed in heart, whose flames aspire
As thoughts do blow them higher and higher.
(William Shakespeare, "The Merry Wives of Windsor")

Untitled

Wicked white walls clamoring on me
Aces spread over the floor
Like black rats' dead bodies,
grouped in small numbers
Then laid out on cards of death
Even no one is coming, I can't deny it
Rats' little faces look up from the rug

Pretending words can contact the gone
Even my mind gives me away
There's unconscious sentences birthing inside me
Evenings they spill out and form little patterns
Reeking of unspoken mental connections
So why are just these strange sounds chose,
in the end I can't tell you
'Ere I go telling it all
Not trying to blaspheme the dead

Teresa Sarick

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